



Official Report (Hansard)

Monday 29 November 2021
Volume 145, No 5

Contents

Assembly Business

Members' Statements

Ben O'Neill: Healthcare Provision	2
Pearson National Teaching Awards	2
Energy Policy.....	3
International Day of People with Disabilities	3
International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women	4
Education Welfare Officers' Strike.....	4
International Day of People with Disabilities	5
Coronavirus Regulations	5
English Channel Deaths	5
World AIDS Day	6
Palestine: International Day of Solidarity.....	7

Ministerial Statement

COVID-19: Omicron Variant.....	7
--------------------------------	---

Executive Committee Business

Social Security (Terminal Illness) Bill: First Stage.....	16
Health and Social Care Bill: Further Consideration Stage	16
Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage	16
Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage.....	16

Committee Business

'Decarbonisation of Road Transport in Northern Ireland': Committee Report.....	17
--	----

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office	20
Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs	29

Committee Business

'Decarbonisation of Road Transport in Northern Ireland': Committee Report (<i>Continued</i>).....	38
---	----

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting	50
---	----

Private Members' Business

Onshore Fracking (Prohibition) Bill: First Stage 50

Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill: Second Stage 50

Assembly Members

Aiken, Steve (South Antrim)
Allen, Andy (East Belfast)
Allister, Jim (North Antrim)
Archibald, Dr Caoimhe (East Londonderry)
Armstrong, Ms Kellie (Strangford)
Bailey, Ms Clare (South Belfast)
Barton, Mrs Rosemary (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Beattie, Doug (Upper Bann)
Beggs, Roy (East Antrim)
Blair, John (South Antrim)
Boylan, Cathal (Newry and Armagh)
Bradley, Maurice (East Londonderry)
Bradley, Ms Paula (North Belfast)
Bradley, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Bradshaw, Ms Paula (South Belfast)
Brogan, Ms Nicola (West Tyrone)
Buchanan, Keith (Mid Ulster)
Buchanan, Thomas (West Tyrone)
Buckley, Jonathan (Upper Bann)
Bunting, Ms Joanne (East Belfast)
Butler, Robbie (Lagan Valley)
Cameron, Mrs Pam (South Antrim)
Carroll, Gerry (West Belfast)
Catney, Pat (Lagan Valley)
Chambers, Alan (North Down)
Clarke, Trevor (South Antrim)
Delargy, Pádraig (Foyle)
Dickson, Stewart (East Antrim)
Dillon, Ms Linda (Mid Ulster)
Dodds, Mrs Diane (Upper Bann)
Dolan, Ms Jemma (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Dunne, Stephen (North Down)
Durkan, Mark (Foyle)
Easton, Alex (North Down)
Ennis, Ms Sinéad (South Down)
Erskine, Mrs Deborah (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Ferguson, Ms Ciara (Foyle)
Flynn, Ms Órlaithí (West Belfast)
Frew, Paul (North Antrim)
Gildernew, Colm (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Givan, Paul (Lagan Valley)
Hargey, Ms Deirdre (South Belfast)
Harvey, Harry (Strangford)
Hilditch, David (East Antrim)
Humphrey, William (North Belfast)
Hunter, Ms Cara (East Londonderry)
Irwin, William (Newry and Armagh)
Kearney, Declan (South Antrim)
Kelly, Mrs Dolores (Upper Bann)
Kelly, Gerry (North Belfast)
Kimmins, Ms Liz (Newry and Armagh)
Long, Mrs Naomi (East Belfast)
Lunn, Trevor (Lagan Valley)
Lyons, Gordon (East Antrim)
Lyttle, Chris (East Belfast)
McAleer, Declan (West Tyrone)
McCrossan, Daniel (West Tyrone)
McGlone, Patsy (Mid Ulster)
McGrath, Colin (South Down)
McGuigan, Philip (North Antrim)
McHugh, Maolíosa (West Tyrone)
McIlveen, Miss Michelle (Strangford)
McLaughlin, Ms Sinead (Foyle)
McNulty, Justin (Newry and Armagh)
Mallon, Ms Nichola (North Belfast)
Maskey, Alex (Speaker)
Middleton, Gary (Foyle)
Muir, Andrew (North Down)
Murphy, Ms Áine (Fermanagh and South Tyrone)
Murphy, Conor (Newry and Armagh)
Nesbitt, Mike (Strangford)
Newton, Robin (East Belfast)
Ní Chuilín, Ms Carál (North Belfast)
O'Dowd, John (Upper Bann)
O'Neill, Mrs Michelle (Mid Ulster)
O'Toole, Matthew (South Belfast)
Poots, Edwin (Lagan Valley)
Reilly, Miss Aisling (West Belfast)
Robinson, George (East Londonderry)
Rogan, Ms Emma (South Down)
Sheehan, Pat (West Belfast)
Sheerin, Ms Emma (Mid Ulster)
Stalford, Christopher (South Belfast)
Stewart, John (East Antrim)
Storey, Mervyn (North Antrim)
Sugden, Ms Claire (East Londonderry)
Swann, Robin (North Antrim)
Weir, Peter (Strangford)
Wells, Jim (South Down)
Woods, Miss Rachel (North Down)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Monday 29 November 2021

The Assembly met at 12.00 noon (Mr Speaker in the Chair).

Members observed two minutes' silence.

Assembly Business

Mr Speaker: Members, as we start business today, I want to mark the fact that this is the 1,000th plenary sitting of the Assembly since 1998. Of course, this is not a moment to be self-congratulatory or to pat ourselves on the back. As Members will be all too aware, the history of the Assembly has been somewhat chequered, as it might be said. As I have said before, we should never forget that the Assembly is essentially on probation in the eyes of the public and that building public confidence in the Assembly requires constant attention. Nonetheless, this is a milestone, and, while we mark the 1,000th sitting, we are not ignoring the issues and challenges that there have been and will continue to be.

However, neither has this process been easy, and, at points, those of my generation would not have thought that the Assembly was even possible. Indeed, as one of the few Members who remain from 1998, I reflect that relationships and the nature of the debates in the Chamber are transformed from how they were in the early days. Recent discussion regarding the pressure on the Assembly to consider legislation before the end of this mandate has underlined the general political and public agreement about the importance of the Assembly and the Executive in addressing issues of public concern.

The politics of events over the years are for others to reflect on in due course, but it is important to acknowledge from the Chair all those who have played their part in getting us to this point. Colleagues, past and present, from parties across the Assembly, have had to take difficult decisions at different times and have often had to make sacrifices and face criticism to move the Assembly forward. I want to recognise the public service of all those who have been involved in those efforts, including those who are no longer with us. I particularly want to mention all the officials who have supported the Assembly and its Members since 1998. Visitors routinely remark to me that they

had not realised the amount of work required behind the scenes to make the Assembly operate.

Therefore, I thank all the staff who have worked in Parliament Buildings to directly or indirectly support Assembly business, often going above and beyond the call of duty. The nature of their work means that it normally happens quietly, unseen and unnoticed, but officials have been critical in making progress at key points in our political process. In fact, I have written today to all members of staff to say that to them directly.

In conclusion, we must not be complacent. Dealing with the divisions in our community and making the Assembly work have never been easy for all the parties, and the number of difficult issues will always be outnumbered by those who think that the solutions are simple. However, while we do not forget our past, the Assembly gives us the opportunity to work together to focus on the future. There will be some busy months ahead to demonstrate that.

Members' Statements

Mr Speaker: If Members wish to be called to make a statement, they should indicate that they wish to do so by continually rising in their place. Members who are called will have up to three minutes in which to make their statement. Members are reminded that statements will not be subject to debate or questioning, interventions will not be permitted and I will take no points of order on this or any other matter until the item of business has finished.

Ben O'Neill: Healthcare Provision

Mr McHugh: I welcome the opportunity to raise this issue because not only was the case of Ben O'Neill, whom I have represented over the last number of months, mentioned here last week but his circumstances and the plight that his family finds itself in are now public knowledge. The local press and local radio and television stations have picked up on the story of the teenager with extremely complex needs who has been offered a place in a facility in Navan in County Meath or in Scotland. The family knew that such provision was totally unacceptable. It was devastating news to the family. They knew that Ben's most immediate need was familiarity with his surroundings, his providers, his school and, in particular, his family.

I am happy to report that, as a result of a meeting that we had with his family and the Western Trust on Friday, we have a resolution to coping with Ben's situation in the short term. However, Ben's situation has highlighted that, rather than an exception, it is more or less the rule that, in the Western Trust area, there is a lack of provision for many people who have special and complex needs. In 2013, it was estimated that one child in every 100 is autistic. It is now three in every 100, but we have not had the same threefold increase in provision or services in our area. A group of parents have identified very strongly what they require for those who are autistic and those with very complex needs, and they submitted an action plan to the Western Trust asking it to be involved in the negotiations of that plan to help meet those needs. The glaring omission in the western area is the greater provision of not only respite care but specialised units or facilities that will accommodate independent living for those with complex needs.

In the past, it has often been the case that, when it comes to a social problem, we have exported it to England or somewhere else or, as was the case in this instance, implied that it

could be dealt with in Navan in County Meath or in Scotland. It is time that we called a halt to that and that we made that kind of provision in our own areas, including west Tyrone, for our own people. Let it not be the case that, when it comes to providing for the most vulnerable, particularly those who are autistic and who have very special multiple needs, we once again look to export the problem rather than to address it. I call on the Health and Education Ministers and the Western Trust to look at that problem immediately.

Pearson National Teaching Awards

Mr Middleton: Like many people across the country, I tuned in to 'The One Show' on Friday evening in anticipation of hearing the outcome of the national teaching awards lifetime achievement award.

It was, in particular, a great pleasure to see that that award went to Marie Lindsay of St Mary's College. Anybody who knows Marie knows that it is a well-deserved award. She has served over three decades in her career, inspiring many young people and generations across the board. I was particularly keen to see that. Her achievements have rightly been recognised by many not only across the constituency but across the world. Most notably, former US president, Bill Clinton, paid a glowing tribute to Marie and the work that she has done in her career.

Among those congratulating Marie on 'The One Show' was the principal of Lisneal College, Michael Allen. He came on the programme to give his congratulations, but, of course, he too was congratulated and left with an award: head teacher of the year in a secondary school. While, no doubt, it was a shock and surprise for Michael, that is another well-deserved award. Two well-known figures have been congratulated on and received an award that they very much deserve.

It is poignant that Marie and Michael were able to share the awards and go to the special ceremony last night in the City of London with family, colleagues and friends. We are blessed in Northern Ireland to have so many teachers, principals and inspirational leaders in our schools. We have people who have made a real and genuine difference. St Mary's College and Lisneal College, along with St Cecilia's College, have done tremendous work in the shared education programme. It is fantastic to see two of those leaders recognised, particularly from the Foyle constituency. I congratulate both of them and all the winners,

particularly those from Northern Ireland. They have done themselves, their schools and, most importantly, all of us in our communities proud.

Energy Policy

Ms McLaughlin: Hear, hear, junior Minister.

Many constituents are in financial crisis, just as the cut in universal credit comes through. We have serious price inflation for food and record-breaking energy prices. For a large number of homes, energy bills will rise by about £1,000 over the year. For low-income households, it will be a choice of whether to heat or to eat. The Utility Regulator has called on the Executive to take action to mitigate the impact of the price increases. My call is for the Executive to convene a cost of living task force urgently. That task force needs to oversee the finalisation of the energy strategy, which has not yet been published.

Past decisions on energy policy are partly responsible for the crisis. It should have been clear years ago that we needed to develop offshore wind farms for the simple reason that, while onshore wind is cheap, it does not provide the reliability and consistency of energy supply that we need. We also need the Executive to oversee the fuel poverty strategy, which has not been published and is now required. I hope that, when the fuel poverty strategy is finalised, it proposes to reform the affordable warmth scheme, so that it focuses on bringing down energy use, cutting fuel bills and, in particular, improving home energy efficiency with higher levels of insulation. What further actions will the Housing Executive take to cut the cost of energy for its tenants?

Other policy decisions are needed. What financial support can be made available to help low-income households, both those in receipt of universal benefits and those in receipt of other benefits? Can winter fuel payments be provided to households on universal credit and legacy benefits? Can new legislation be introduced to increase the notice period prior to energy companies increasing prices? Can more be done to support food banks, and how can we develop fuel banks? What action can we take to eliminate loan sharks and to support credit unions in putting loans in place?

Too often, the Executive are criticised for being too slow to respond to situations. The Executive need to start to act faster, which requires planning. There is a serious risk of the cost of living crisis getting worse and getting out of hand over the winter, especially if we have a

cold winter. The Executive therefore need to consider how to plan for a possibly even worse situation than our constituents face today.

12.15 pm

International Day of People with Disabilities

Ms Bradshaw: Ahead of International Day of People with Disabilities on Friday 3 December, I highlight the barriers that disabled people face, not least in the wake of COVID-19. All of us have experienced isolation as a result of the pandemic, but, for people with disabilities, the effect of the lockdowns has been particularly hard felt. Many who remain vulnerable to the virus have spent vast amounts of time shielding in their home. Ultimately, as restrictions were eased, they were left with the impression that they were considered as an afterthought and, eventually, not being considered at all.

A Disability Action survey showed that 57% of disabled people faced challenges in accessing food and medicine in 2020, whilst 38% reported challenges around caring commitments. With the current high levels of community transmission of the virus, there will be rising concern, especially given that 60% of deaths from coronavirus in the UK have been of people with disabilities. That is a staggering statistic and one that truly drives home the devastating impact that the virus has had on disabled people and how government, at times, has failed to protect them.

While COVID-19 has exacerbated issues around access and health inequalities, people with disabilities have long faced physical and systemic barriers in our society. As a member of the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights, I was struck by the heartfelt evidence that Mr Tony O'Reilly from the Northwest Forum of People with Disabilities gave when he highlighted how disabled people do not feel that they have rights in Northern Ireland and how, instead, they are seen as being resource-based and resource-intensive. What was clear was the need for issues affecting people with disabilities to be seen through a human rights lens, which makes it all the more frustrating that the DUP has now decided to obstruct that Committee's progress on its important work.

It was only a few weeks ago that I called for a single equality Bill for Northern Ireland, but we need to do so much more than catch up with the rest of the UK. We need to ensure that, as a society, we are not constantly building barriers to access and that we see people as valued

members of society and not as burdens. We must champion rights and equality. We need to reform welfare assessment and live up to our obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

I note that the first ever sitting of the Disabled People's Parliament will take place in the Chamber on 3 December. I wish all its members all the very best in their endeavours.

International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women

Miss Woods: Thursday 25 November was International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. It also marked the start of the international campaign of 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence, which runs until Human Rights Day on 10 December. Calling for the prevention and elimination of violence against women and girls, it was started by activists in 1991 and continues to be coordinated each year by the Center for Women's Global Leadership. According to the latest estimates, nearly one in three women aged 15 years and older from around the world has been subjected to physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, a non-partner or both at least once in her lifetime, indicating that levels of violence against women and girls have remained largely unchanged over the past decade.

The theme for this year is "Orange the World: End Violence against Women Now!". While it is important to mark the campaign, it is also important that the House and society reflect on what we are doing in Northern Ireland and what we are not. We finally have domestic abuse legislation, and we are working to introduce stalking offences and to introduce Gillen review recommendations as part of the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Bill, but 11 women that we know of have been killed in Northern Ireland since the start of the pandemic. Ten were killed or are suspected to have been killed by someone known to them.

Misogyny is not yet a hate crime, and we still have no mandatory, comprehensive relationships and sexuality education (RSE) provision for children and young people in Northern Ireland. We still have no violence against women and girls strategy, and that is key. The Executive must formulate, publish, fund, support and resource such a strategy for Northern Ireland. The 16 Days of Activism need to be marked by action by the Executive to tackle violence against women and girls in our society effectively.

We have to stop neutralising gender in government policies. We need to recognise gender-based violence and understand that our ideas about gender and gender stereotypes can affect how we treat other people, including through discrimination and violence, bullying, sexual harassment, psychological violence, domestic violence, abuse, rape, female genital mutilation (FGM), forced marriage and homophobic and transphobic violence and abuse.

We need to teach young people how stereotypes can contribute to those issues, and we need to recognise that gender inequality and gender-role stereotypes contribute to gender-based violence.

I do not want to be back here in several weeks or months to hear about more women being murdered or to be asking and urging the Executive to do what we already know needs to be done. The time for action is now.

Education Welfare Officers' Strike

Mr Carroll: I want to raise the case of the strike by NIPSA members who work as education welfare officers across the North, and who, today, are beginning their first day on strike as part of a two-week campaign. I offer them my solidarity and send my best wishes to them in their fight whilst they brave picket lines in the cold.

The dispute is about ensuring that workers are paid properly for the jobs that they do. Education welfare officers provide an essential service to some of the most vulnerable, marginalised and, frankly, forgotten-about young people in our communities. In many ways, they are social workers but with a different title. However, they are paid significantly less than their social work counterparts.

There is a discrepancy of £5,000 per year in what education welfare officers are paid by the Education Authority and social workers are paid by health and social care trusts. That is not to say, of course, that social workers are rolling in it. Far from it. However, it is to recognise that there is a historical discrepancy in pay, and a significant one at that, and it should not be allowed to continue. Such a disparity in pay levels is, frankly, obscene, and it would not be allowed to exist in most other sectors or spheres, so why should it be allowed to exist here?

The strike is not about pitting workers against each other but about paying people what they are worth for the work that they do. This morning, I spoke to workers on the picket lines. They are livid that the employer and the Minister have failed to intervene and allocate that money. Whilst that money is, obviously, quite a lot for those workers, in the grand scheme of things, in the Executive's Budget, it is a drop in the ocean. We are talking about 130 workers who provide essential work to vulnerable and at-risk young people. Their work is being undervalued and they are being underpaid.

The strike is about not only recognising and resolving pay disparity but recruitment and retention. Many workers are looking at the trusts as employers, and their pay rates, and deciding that it is better for them and their families if they switch jobs. Workers and unions are livid that the employer has failed to settle on this issue. They are angry that, despite repeated lobbying and agitation, the Education Authority and the Department have not intervened.

Today, I am calling on the Education Minister to intervene as a matter of urgency to meet the demands of those workers. Just imagine where we would be in a situation such as COVID without those workers. Now is the time to pay them what they are owed. Those workers are also impacted on by the universal credit uplift being scrapped, fuel price increases this winter and the general increase in the cost of living. Workers should not be placed in situations where they are grossly underpaid for the work that they do.

Education welfare officers, and University and College Union workers, have shown what to do when faced with belligerent employers. Solidarity to them.

International Day of People with Disabilities

Mr Delargy: Friday 3 December, as Ms Bradshaw said, is International Day of People with Disabilities. The theme this year is rights in the context of the ongoing impact of COVID-19. The global themes refer to a post-COVID era, but we are not in a position, as a region, to discuss the post-COVID era or to use that terminology at present.

While marginalisation, discrimination, vulnerability and exploitation can impact upon many people, deaf and disabled people in particular have faced challenges in accessing

routine health and social care, increased isolation, declining mental and physical health and barriers to accessing food and medicine. It is important to recognise that deaf and disabled people account for almost two thirds of COVID deaths. I ask that the Assembly acknowledges that and recognises the loss that families in particular have experienced throughout this crisis.

On Friday, disabled people across the North are asking that we, the people who represent them, wear purple to support them and their families as a mark of respect for those who lost their lives during COVID-19, and to acknowledge the resilience and determination that disabled people have shown throughout the pandemic. I ask all of you to reach out to the deaf and disabled community over the next number of days. I ask that the Assembly and the Executive commit to legislative reform that will improve the lives of deaf and disabled people.

Coronavirus Regulations

Mr Frew: Mr Speaker, thank you for reminding this place of its milestone of 1,000 plenary sittings — this bastion of coalition, this champion of democratic openness and accountability. In this House of relevant debate and important, proper scrutiny, it is important that we also mark this day, 29 November 2021, as the day that we see, as I have warned for many months, that one person — one person — can make, amend and enact legislation and regulation. Let those words sink in. Not only that but, during this 1,000th plenary sitting, that person does so without bringing forward any equality impact assessment and with no economic impact assessment and no evidence whatsoever of positive health outcomes. In this place of coalition, this champion of democratic openness and accountability and this House of relevant debate and proper, important scrutiny, one person can make, amend and enact, on this very day, regulations. The ironic thing is that that action and the impact of that regulation discriminates against one family member over another, treats them differently and prevents them from entering everyday services. What will the House do? What will the parties that make up the House do in this scenario?

English Channel Deaths

Mr O'Toole: Last week, 27 people died in the English Channel when a vessel that was carrying them overturned. They are among the 150 people who have died crossing that Channel in the last five years. They are people

and human beings, contrary to some of the media depictions of them as simply migrants. There is an issue with how countries — the UK, Ireland and other EU member states — deal with the movement of people in crisis. People are moving from places where either they are in conflict zones or they or their families are at immediate risk of loss of life, and that has been a problem for the last number of decades.

The actions of this UK Government over the last few weeks have been particularly shocking and egregious in how they have handled this issue. It is worth saying that, despite some of the crass, immoral distortions and claims made by Tory MPs, the majority of people who make this treacherous and unthinkable journey do so because they are at extreme risk. It is particularly unthinkable if you have a child with you, because all of us, particularly those of us with children, know that it would only be in the most extreme and appalling circumstances that anybody would think to put their child in a dinghy to cross the English Channel. However, the distortions of Tory MPs suggest that the majority of the people making this crossing are economic migrants. Well, that is not the case. Priti Patel claimed the other day that 70% of the people crossing the Channel were economic migrants. That is a complete falsehood and has been proven to be a falsehood. These are people moving from war-torn countries where they and their families are often at extreme risk.

12.30 pm

Why are they having to make that appalling, risky decision? Yes, there are exploitative gangs at work who absolutely need to be dealt with, but it is also because the UK Government have shut down the legal means for people to enter the UK in order to claim asylum. The Syrian scheme has closed. People in this place will remember Alf Dubs's scheme to take children. Let us not forget that 42% of displaced people on the globe are children. The Dubs scheme has closed. The UK Government claimed that they would set up a scheme to allow asylum for Afghan people moving away from the Taliban, but that has not yet opened. We have seen a huge range of distortions from the British Government over the last few years —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — in how they have handled the issue of migration and asylum seekers. We, in this place, need to take a stand —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up.

Mr O'Toole: — on behalf of decency —

Mr Speaker: The Member's time is up. Thank you.

Mr O'Toole: — and humanity.

World AIDS Day

Mr Muir: I take the opportunity to highlight World AIDS Day, which will take place on Wednesday and is the biggest opportunity each year to raise awareness of HIV and show solidarity with those affected.

In Northern Ireland, we have seen hugely significant advances over recent years, including the availability of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) medicine, the Undetectable Equals Untransmittable campaign and the work of committed local charities. According to the latest available figures, 1,123 people live with HIV in Northern Ireland. In 2019, there were 52 new diagnoses, a 35% drop from 80 in the previous year. Whilst those figures are positive, the absence of a HIV action plan or sexual health strategy for Northern Ireland means that there is no way to guarantee that they are part of a sustained, long-term decline.

It is also important to note that Northern Ireland has the highest levels of HIV-related stigma anywhere on these islands. According to the charity Positive Life, we lag 10 to 15 years behind other parts of the UK in how we, as a society, view HIV and those impacted. The fact that we do not have a strategy guided by targets and with ring-fenced funding in place to support a long-term vision makes it even more difficult to play catch-up with this.

HIV and stigma is not one Department's responsibility; it requires an approach that is cross-cutting and covers key areas including education, health, employment, civic society and others. A 2020 Positive Life survey found that 22% of people in Northern Ireland would not approve of someone with HIV looking after their child and 39% would not approve of a family member dating someone with HIV. The same survey also found that 71% of people believe that we need to do more in schools to improve understanding of HIV and sexual health. We need to advocate for modern and positive understanding of HIV with age-appropriate relationships and sexuality education at the core so that we can move away from harmful and outdated views. Put simply, we must get serious about HIV.

In closing, I quote the slogan for World AIDS Day 2021:

"End inequalities. End AIDS. End pandemics."

Palestine: International Day of Solidarity

Ms Kimmins: Today marks International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People. It is important that the international community takes the opportunity to show support for the hopes and aspirations of the Palestinian people to live in peace and freedom.

Palestinian people continue to live under a brutal Israeli occupation that ignores international law, lays siege to Gaza and practises routine repression in the West Bank. If international laws are to mean anything, the international community must stand up against that illegal aggression. That is why I am proud that Sinn Féin successfully passed an historic motion in Leinster House that resulted in the Irish Government becoming the first Administration in Europe to recognise that a de facto annexation has taken place in Palestine. My party now calls on the Irish Government to recognise the state of Palestine and use their influence on the UN Security Council to demand the enforcement of international law and the full implementation of the international resolutions that Israel continues to flout. Those are tangible steps, but, as the fight against apartheid in South Africa showed, every show of international solidarity is important.

We send this clear message to the Palestinian people: we stand four-square with you in your long struggle for peace and justice in your homeland.

Mr Speaker: That ends Members' Statements. Members, please take your ease for a moment or two.

Ministerial Statement

COVID-19: Omicron Variant

Mr Speaker: I have received notice from the Minister of Health that he wishes to make a statement. Before I call the Minister, I remind Members in the Chamber that, in light of the social distancing being observed by the parties, the Speaker's ruling that Members must be in the Chamber to hear a statement if they wish to ask a question has been relaxed. Members who are participating remotely must make sure that their name is on the speaking list if they wish to be called. Members who are present in the Chamber must indicate their wish to be called by rising in their place or notifying the Business Office or the Speaker's Table directly. I remind Members to be concise in asking their question. I also remind Members that, in accordance with long-established procedure, points of order are not normally taken during the statement or the question period afterwards.

Mr Swann (The Minister of Health): Mr Speaker, with your permission, I would like to make a statement on the new variant of the COVID-19 virus that has been identified in southern Africa.

Although only a small proportion of the overall COVID-19 cases in Northern Ireland has related to individuals who have recently been outside the United Kingdom, there is a particular risk from international travel due to the potential importation of novel variants that have originated in other countries. It is for that reason that restrictions on international travel have been put in place throughout the pandemic, with different requirements for the provision of information, testing and quarantine depending on the country travelled from and reflecting the level of risk for each country. More recently, the distinction has been made in the restrictions between fully vaccinated travellers and those with a greater risk of onward transmission of the virus.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a large number of variants have been identified, reflecting the natural tendency for viruses to mutate over time. Although many of those variants have involved only minor changes from those already in circulation, some may be more resistant to vaccines. Others, such as delta, are much more transmissible, as is reflected in its current dominant status in Northern Ireland.

Last week, evidence of a new, more concerning variant of the COVID-19 virus began to emerge. It has now been classified as the omicron

variant of concern or B.1.1.529. Whilst the variant was first identified in southern Africa, it is now present in an increasing number of countries across the world. Although there is limited evidence of the impact of the new variant, there are concerns that it has a large number of mutations, which means that there is the potential for it to be resistant to vaccines and more transmissible. As yet, it is unclear whether its clinical impact will be more serious.

I add my thanks for the work of the scientists and clinicians in South Africa in identifying the new variant at an early stage. That highlights the importance of ongoing surveillance of the COVID-19 virus.

No confirmed cases of the omicron variant have been identified in Northern Ireland at the moment, but it is highly likely that that position will change in the coming days. The Public Health Agency (PHA) is undertaking detailed risk assessments of some returning travellers from red-listed countries and is advising on any immediate public health actions that are required to slow the introduction of the variant and to limit its spread in Northern Ireland. In light of the cases identified in England and Scotland, it is to be expected that there may already be cases of the variant in Northern Ireland.

The Public Health Agency has established with immediate effect a regional incident management team that is in close liaison with a UK-wide incident management team, and there is ongoing engagement with the Republic of Ireland. The Public Health Agency is utilising passenger locator forms, and contact tracing has identified all recent returning passengers from southern Africa via the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. It is actively contacting those passengers and completing enhanced questionnaires. In addition, pillar 1 and pillar 2 positive results for the last six weeks will be reviewed for any suspicion of the variant.

When evidence of the virus first emerged last week, I took immediate action and placed South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho and eSwatini on the red list of countries, with further assessments to be made of other countries with strong links to South Africa. As a result, Malawi and Mozambique were added to the Northern Ireland red list last Friday, whilst Angola and Zambia were included yesterday.

In the United Kingdom, travellers who have been in a red list country for the previous 10 days are required to enter into managed quarantine accommodation for at least 10 days

and take day two and day eight PCR tests. Although the local managed quarantine hotel had been scaled back due to the removal of all red list countries in October, it resumed operation yesterday. Any positive cases among arrivals from red list countries will continue to be prioritised for genomic sequencing. The imposition of travel restrictions on southern African countries has now been put in place by a number of other countries. In the Republic of Ireland, arrivals from Botswana, eSwatini, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa and Zimbabwe are required to undergo home quarantine and PCR testing.

Over the weekend, there was confirmation of the first cases of COVID-19 in England with mutations consistent with the omicron variant, whilst, earlier today, the first cases were confirmed in Scotland. In line with the approach in the rest of the United Kingdom, I have decided that, in light of the characteristics of the variant, additional measures will shortly be put in place in Northern Ireland for all international arrivals. The Executive agreed in July 2021 to the relaxation of travel restrictions for those who have been vaccinated in the United Kingdom, and that has gradually been extended to other vaccinated travellers. However, the evidence that the omicron variant has potentially significant mutations that may change the behaviour of the virus with regard to vaccines, treatments and transmissibility means that there is a need to reinstate some of the previous requirements until there is a better understanding of the risks.

All arrivals into Northern Ireland from non-red list countries, including those who are fully vaccinated, will now be required to self-isolate for 10 days unless they receive a negative test result, with a PCR test to be undertaken on or before day two. The requirement for a PCR test when an alternative lateral flow test was previously available for day two post-arrival testing for fully vaccinated arrivals is because it is not possible to conduct genomic sequencing in respect of lateral flow tests. We will keep all those arrangements under review and will consider what additional measures may be necessary in the coming days. It is planned that the changes will take effect in international travel regulations early this week, although the advice is that travellers should follow the new arrangements immediately.

Whilst it is inevitable that there will be more cases identified, in the current context, it is important not only to reduce the number of cases being imported but to limit and slow the spread of the variant in any local communities in which it may be identified. In response,

contacts of new variant cases will be required to self-isolate for 10 days, even if they are fully vaccinated. Again, that is in line with the approach being taken across the rest of the United Kingdom. Although the scientific evidence remains limited, it is now reasonably clear that the omicron variant is more transmissible, and it remains possible that it may reduce vaccine effectiveness compared with the delta variant. In light of those risks and the uncertainty, the measures will be reviewed in three weeks when more evidence will be available.

Members will be aware of the severe pressures that we are already under from the delta variant. It had been hoped that the situation would improve in the coming weeks and months from a combination of further progress on the vaccine programme, the introduction of domestic certification and a renewed focus on the other measures to reduce the spread of the virus, such as improved compliance with wearing face coverings, working from home where possible and good ventilation. Therefore, the emergence of the omicron variant is a serious and concerning development that has the potential to act as a further shock to our health and social care system. Whilst it is inevitable that there will be cases of the variant in Northern Ireland, if there are not already, it is essential that preventative measures are now taken.

I recognise that the measures that I am announcing today will have consequences for individuals, their families and the local economy. Recent figures indicate that there are between 5,000 and 6,000 international arrivals into Northern Ireland each week, primarily from Spain, with only very small numbers from southern Africa. However, it is essential that we follow the approach that has been announced for the rest of the United Kingdom in order to reduce the risk of a potentially even greater and more serious wave of infection than that which we currently face. The position in the Republic of Ireland will also be kept under close observation.

I sincerely hope that the scale of the transmissibility advantage of the new variant is not as large as feared and/or that the symptoms are more moderate than the delta variant, particularly for the most vulnerable. However, until we know more about the characteristics of the new variant, it is not acceptable to take the risk with the health of our people, and we need to take action urgently.

12.45 pm

It should be stressed that, although the omicron variant may reduce the effectiveness of the current vaccines, it remains very likely that vaccination will continue to protect against severe illness from omicron, as it does against other variants. That means that it is critical that we continue and, indeed, accelerate our vaccination programme to ensure that as many people as possible avail themselves of this essential protection. We know that our vaccines provide good protection from the delta variant, which at this stage remains very much the predominant strain in Northern Ireland. While we quite properly need to take action on the potential omicron threat, let us not lose sight of the devastation that delta has caused and continues to cause. Vaccination remains central to our public health response to the pandemic, and some three million jabs have been deployed in Northern Ireland in under a year. The programme has had and will continue to have its challenges. That is inevitable with an undertaking of this magnitude by a health system already under severe and relentless pressure.

Let us be grateful for just how advanced the vaccination programme is here in comparison with many parts of the world and be thankful to all those whose commitment has made this possible. I appeal to everyone in the House — everyone — to support and encourage vaccination by word and by deed. That is the responsible thing to do. Let us not be bullied or distracted by the tiny minority of anti-vaxxers and their fellow travellers. In addition, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has been asked to consider whether anything needs to change with our vaccination programme to meet the new threat posed by the omicron variant, including potential expansion of the scope of the booster programme. Further advice is expected shortly, which will seek to maximise the vaccination programme in light of the advice to be provided by JCVI and the threat posed by the omicron variant.

Let me conclude with a direct appeal to the House and to the public. This new variant is undoubtedly concerning. There will be more confirmed cases on these islands, and it is highly likely that these will include Northern Ireland. Preventative measures and vigilance are vital to delaying and reducing any incursion coming our way. However, this is not a time for either panic or despair, and nor is it a time for helplessness, complacency or speculation. Variants all spread the same way — through contact between people — and we can all help to stop that happening. That includes getting vaccinated and encouraging others to do

likewise. It also means making safer choices in our daily lives. The public look to the House to lead by example and to maintain a united front through our actions, our policies, our words and, indeed, the tone of our debates. I am very conscious of the toll that the pandemic has taken on the mental well-being of our citizens, as well as the devastating impact on the physical health of so many. We all need to be aware of that, to keep looking after each other, to be positive and determined about the actions that we all can take and to convey a message of hope and not despair.

Mr Gildernew (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health): Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire. Thank you, Minister, for coming to make this statement today. I particularly note and welcome in your statement the fact that the need for PCR testing for this variant will be revisited and the fact that it was picked up via PCR testing. I put on record appreciation for the health experts in South Africa who were so prompt in alerting the world to this new variant.

Minister, you will be aware that the president of South Africa has raised the issue of global vaccine inequalities and how that is contributing to spread across the world. In the light of that, do you agree that initiatives for global equitable access to vaccines, treatments and therapies, such as the European Citizens' Initiative (ECI) Right to Cure, are important for addressing the threat of COVID-19 on a global level?

Mr Swann: I thank the Chair for his comments. I am supportive of the international effort to make sure that there is an equitable supply of vaccines worldwide, as are the UK Government, by way of the vaccines that have been deployed through COVAX. Having listened to the WHO statements this morning, I think that it is important that more be done to ensure that there is vaccine equality, while also taking into consideration the needs of our population in Northern Ireland, the supplies that we have and the programme that is in place to make sure that JCVI advice and guidance is followed when we receive it, which I expect will be later today.

Mrs Cameron: I thank the Minister for his statement to the House on this important issue. It is important that we do not cause undue panic about the new variant. We do not yet know, however, what the impact of the omicron variant is, so it is vital that the PHA be vigilant in tracking and tracing and in gathering information that can be acted on, if and when required and as soon as possible.

Given the complexity around age ranges, the vaccines that are available, and where and how vaccinations are available, will the Minister consider the introduction of a one-stop-shop app or telephone line by which the information required to access vaccines can be provided as quickly as possible? Are conversations happening UK-wide about the time between the second dose and the booster dose? Will the Minister ensure that, if changes to that come about, Northern Ireland does not lag behind when changing tack and keeps up with the roll-out?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. She will be aware that we take our direction and guidance on vaccination from the JCVI, and we will continue to do that. There were a number of meetings of the JCVI over the weekend. We expect an update from it later this afternoon, not just on eligibility for boosters but on a review of the timeline between receipt of second vaccination and receipt of the booster. If that advice goes the way in which some in the media seem already to have been briefed that it will go, accessibility will be made much easier, and it will be a lot simpler to confirm that to people, so there will not be those myriad avenues for people to go down.

At this point, I thank not only our GPs but our community pharmacists and those who work in trust settings to get the vaccines out to a large number of the population. As I said earlier, I think that our dashboard will today report that we have delivered 3,009,000-odd vaccines. That takes into consideration the fact that we did not have a certified vaccine at this time last year. The programme continues to expand, and we will follow the JCVI advice and get it implemented as quickly as possible. Our vaccination teams and management structures have been meeting since the end of last week in preparation for what the JCVI may say so that we can make sure that we can act on it as soon as possible.

Mr McGrath: I thank the Minister for his statement and his update to the House. I echo his remarks that this is not a time for "panic or despair". We can work together to contain this if we all stick to the things that we know to do for the best, such as washing hands, observing social distancing and getting ourselves checked out if we have any symptoms.

I will ask the Minister about some of the changes. Minister, you suggested that the planned changes to the international programme will hopefully come in early this week. Can you tell us about the process by which that will become something that needs to

be followed? I also note that you said that a PCR test will be undertaken "on or before day two". Does that mean that people can get tested the minute that they arrive back and that a negative result will work for them, or does it mean that they must wait until day two to take that test?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. He will be aware that that any change will be made through a change to the regulations that I have been making on international travel.

The change in sequencing of day-two PCR tests needs Executive approval. I have written to the First Minister and the deputy First Minister under the urgent decision procedure to ask for that decision to be expedited so that we keep in line with the rest of the United Kingdom. At this time, the initial test is at day two or prior, which, as the Member indicated, is day one of arrival. The individual has to wait for a negative result before they release themselves from the 10-day isolation. I stress that that is for all international travel apart from travel from red-list countries; anybody coming from a red-list country is subject to day-two and day-eight PCR tests and mandatory quarantine isolation through the hotel system. To be very clear, the day-two PCR that the Member referenced is in relation to international travel from non-red-list countries.

Mr Chambers: I welcome the indication that there is going to be a further announcement from the JCVI. Is the Minister satisfied that he has the staff, the vaccines and the infrastructure in place to meet whatever the new decision may be? I thank him for his calm, measured and responsible response to the latest development, especially his call for collective political messaging from this House.

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. We have not received the JCVI final advice and guidance as of yet, but we expect to receive it this afternoon. One of my officials has been an observer of some of those conversations; there has been an indication as to what is expected. I am confident that we have the vaccine and the vaccinators. As I said earlier, it is a complicated system at this point in time, but I am hopeful that the JCVI advice and guidance will start to make that a bit easier.

We have averaged over 15,000 vaccinations per day, across all settings, over the past seven days, which is a greater number than we were doing this time six months ago. As of today, our number of vaccines deployed is over 3 million, with over 372,000 third and booster doses

having been deployed to date. The system is a credit to all those involved. I was slightly disappointed that, about a week or a week and a half ago, some Members talked about the slowness of our vaccine system and the boosters being deployed. I thank and commend all those who have been involved since its commencement.

Ms Bradshaw: Thank you, Health Minister, for your statement this morning. I am pleased to hear that there are enough vaccines for the booster programme. I hope that that is rolled out quickly.

My question is about the concern that there is in the wider community because of the new variant. Are you going to update any guidance and advice for those who were previously asked to shield and/or their carers?

Mr Swann: We are not at that stage yet. We are waiting to see more evidence about the severity, the transmissibility and the potential medical implications of the variant. We are currently taking the precautionary steps that we know work. We enacted them when we saw what was classified as the mink variant, which originated in Europe and spread across it very quickly. We are taking similar steps now. The playbook is there for what we do and what we know works to slow and delay the variant in coming to the shores of Northern Ireland. However, we need to be realistic: there is no way of preventing it completely. As I said in my statement, for all that we know, it may already be here, given the indication of cases that we see in England and Scotland. It is about making sure that we delay and slow that spread as much as possible until the scientists do their work, over the next couple of weeks, on how susceptible the variant is to our current vaccines and its transmissibility and severity.

Ms Flynn: I thank the Minister for his statement today and for the clarity that he has provided thus far. I will follow on from Paula's question, although it was specifically around the guidance for people who are shielding. Does the Minister intend to update the advice on the COVID symptoms in accordance with the new variant? The public might be confused or uncertain because they hear that a new variant is spreading. Are there any changes to look out for in the symptoms or what to expect?

Mr Swann: I have had conversations with the CMO and the CSA; there is no specific change to the notable symptoms at the minute.

I have heard some of the reports and commentary on symptoms, including interviews that have been done with some of the South African medics who first identified the potential of the omicron variant. At this minute in time I have received no advice or guidance on changing the list of symptoms, but that is kept under constant review by the CMO and CSA.

1.00 pm

Mrs Erskine: I thank the Minister for coming to the House to give us an update. I am particularly interested in the travel arrangements and the regulations that are coming into place. Look at Dublin and the people who are travelling by air and sea there. Travellers have raised a particular concern about the availability of PCR tests, which are obviously important, and the amount of money that they have to spend to get them. What consultation have you or your Department undertaken with the air travel and tourism sectors to ensure the availability of PCR tests? Has the Republic of Ireland ever agreed to share passenger locator form information with the Northern Ireland Executive?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. On her last point, yes, we eventually got to that stage, although it was only a number of weeks ago that the memorandum was actually signed. We are fortunate that we persisted with that work even though, at that point, it looked as if it might not be necessary. The sharing of information between my Department and our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on travellers who have come into the Republic of Ireland through Dublin Airport and travelled on to Northern Ireland has proven very useful. We have been able to pass those details on to the PHA, which has been in contact with them.

The issue of direct liaison with the travel industry and PCR test providers was part of a conversation at a four nations meeting with regard to COVID-O — operational. The Secretary of State for Transport took on that engagement on behalf of all four nations with regard to how that conversation could be had. The PCR test availability was there, and unfortunately I noticed that there was some commentary on how the price of those tests escalated as soon as the announcement was made. That was unfortunate, but I still encourage everyone who is coming here after international travel to take a PCR test on day two, because that will allow us to further sequence with regard to notification of omicron and its development.

Ms Dillon: Minister, as you have outlined, you intend to upscale the roll-out of the booster vaccine programme. I want to ask about that on behalf of a constituent who contacted me. She is a 35-year-old lady who is 32 weeks pregnant and was advised by her GP and midwives that she should have the booster vaccine as she had her second vaccine in May. She said that she was going round in circles last week trying to see if there was any way of accessing it, because she falls outside the age range. Can you advise when she might expect to be able to get the booster vaccine?

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Mr Swann: I appreciate that and thank the Member, the GP and the midwives for encouraging her to come forward. There was a challenge in regard to pregnant women coming forward to get their vaccines, so I am glad that that message is getting out there. She does not meet the current age range, but, if the Member listens to the announcement that the JCVI will make later this afternoon and the follow-up guidance that comes from my Department with regard to that, she can pass that on to her constituents.

Mr O'Toole: Minister, thank you for your statement. We do not know yet, as you said, what the transmissibility or the effect on serious illness of the new variant is. However, we know — you said this — that mixed messaging and different messages coming from different parts of the Executive have a real and damaging effect on public confidence. Does the Minister agree that, if the variant is more transmissible, effective roll-out of domestic vaccine certification will be critical to managing the new world that we will be in? Does he also agree that statements from Ministers that undermine public confidence in that vaccine certification scheme are unacceptable?

Mr Swann: Yes.

Ms Ferguson: Minister, thank you for your statement. It brings home the reality that the fight against COVID is complex and ever-changing. Last year, the House called for an updated Health-led strategy based on find, test, trace, isolate and support principles. Is the Minister working on that strategy to take account of international travel, the booster roll-out and COVID-19 certificates?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The Chair of the Health Committee raised that last week during our debate on the regulations. We keep an ongoing review of what test, trace and

protect provides and supports in regard to general testing and tracing. Our PHA has also stepped up as an incident management site specifically to follow the omicron cases that have been identified and the international travellers who have come into Northern Ireland in the past 10 days from the countries that have now been deemed red. There is a programme through which they are all contacted, traced and asked to come forward for additional testing if that is deemed necessary. Through our PHA and our test, trace and protect systems, we have the systems in place for what can and needs to be done.

As we see an increasing number of positive cases of delta as well, I alert the Member to the fact that the same test, trace and protect system chases those up. In the week up to 21 November, we transferred 11,500 positive cases to the test, trace and protect system, which engendered another 30,000 contacts. That shows that, for every positive case, three direct contacts are being identified, which is an increase on what we were seeing this time last year. More people having more contacts increases the number of positive cases and the pressures that we see. We ask people to look at the number of contacts that they have, because, if you reduce the number of contacts, you reduce the opportunity for not just omicron but delta to spread.

Mr Butler: Minister, at the end of a week in which we became more aware of the threats to your life and to your wider family being made on social media and the relentless determination of one former Minister in the House not to support what you are trying to do for public health, I thank you for the speed at which you and your Department acted on omicron and the threat that it poses.

You will be aware of the comments by the Scottish and Welsh First Ministers. Are you satisfied that, on the whole, UK Health Ministers have worked well together in recent days and will likely continue to do so in the time ahead?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member for that point. One of the strengths that we have seen since the beginning of the pandemic is the interactions that have taken place between the four home nations' Health Ministers on what needs to be done from a medical and scientific point of view and being able to set aside party politics to do so. The workings of that group are a testimony and an example that could be utilised elsewhere. An Ulster Unionist Health Minister from Northern Ireland, a Conservative, Tory Health Minister from England, a Labour Health Minister from Wales and a Scottish

nationalist Health Minister from Scotland — even though other members have changed over the past number of months — all come to those meetings with the same sense of purpose, which is to make sure that we manage the pandemic as best we can and support our health services and those who work in them. Since Friday afternoon, when omicron was escalated to a variant of concern by the World Health Organization, we have had a number of meetings over the weekend at Health Minister and then First Minister levels on the ongoing engagement and commitment between our Chief Medical Officers and public health agencies. Those meetings mean that we are coming at this with a unified sense of purpose.

Mr Dickson: I thank the Minister for his statement and his words of encouragement to everybody in the House to speak with one voice on how we need to protect ourselves.

Minister, can you tell us what discussions you may have had over the weekend with the Economy Minister and, indeed, other Ministers who may have gone off-message, about the way in which we are moving forward to protect everyone in Northern Ireland? One of the objectives of the economy is to keep our businesses open: do you agree that one of the best ways of keeping businesses open is to follow the rules that you lay down through the health regulations and that there needs to be absolute clarity on those rules and regulations?

Mr Swann: I agree with the Member about the regulations that are being brought forward not just by me but by the Executive and by debate in the House. The best way to keep our economy open is by keeping our people safe. That is our key aim. That is what we set about delivering daily.

In regard to the Member's question about comments that were made at the end of the week and whether I had any engagement with the Economy Minister over the weekend, no, I have not.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for his statement. I absolutely agree that our message should be unified. We should be out there telling people to get vaccinated. I am due to get my booster after 6 December, and I will be there to get my booster. I also got my flu jab a few weeks ago.

Until Mr O'Toole decided to start on the subject, I was not going to bring this up, but will the Minister accept that his mixed messaging at the

latter part of last week has led to a bit of confusion for some in our hospitality sector?

Mr Swann: No, I will not accept that. The 13-page paper that I supplied to my Executive colleagues on Friday afternoon set out not the change of direction but the change of step and speed. The legal advice and engagement that we had with the hospitality sector over the week, led by the Executive's COVID-19 task force, led to a change in the paper that had originally been set out. A number of small changes to the paper were communicated to all my Executive colleagues on Thursday afternoon, and I am slightly surprised that the paper that I supplied to the Executive was one that was not leaked.

Miss Reilly: Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire teacht anseo inniu leis an ráiteas a thabhairt. I thank the Minister for his statement today. The new COVID variant shows just how quickly the virus can mutate and spread across the globe, and it is important that we act fast and coordinate responses. The Minister mentioned the Scottish and Welsh Ministers. Did he speak directly with Minister Donnelly in the South over the weekend? What coordination is being carried out on an all-island basis?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. I spoke with Stephen Donnelly about the steps that we were going to take in Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom so that he had an opportunity not just to take similar steps but to brief the Taoiseach. That is why, I think, you will see a similarity in response from the Republic of Ireland regarding the countries of concern that are on the red list. They have not yet stepped up their managed hotel quarantine system, but Stephen Donnelly said that he would have that conversation to instigate that policy again.

As I indicated, our officials were in touch over the weekend, especially around sharing the data, now that we have agreement in place for sharing passenger locator form information. That has been working over the weekend for travellers who came in through Dublin Airport and travelled on to Northern Ireland. That system is proving effective, and that communication and engagement between us and our counterparts in the Republic of Ireland will continue because that is the best way that we can respond to the variant and the virus.

Mr Durkan: I welcome that engagement between the Minister and his counterpart in Dublin. Cross-jurisdictional collaboration and coordination will be vital. On that point, it is my understanding that there have been letters from

the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales to the Prime Minister seeking an urgent COBRA meeting to establish that coordinated approach across regions. Where are we in that? Has the Minister spoken to the First Ministers here to see whether they will take similar action?

Mr Swann: I have not had any engagement at that level, but I attended a meeting on Saturday evening led by Michael Gove that included representations from the First Ministers of all the devolved Administrations, and the deputy First Minister was represented there as well. I have not had sight of a request from the Scottish or Welsh First Ministers for a COBRA meeting, but it may have been discussed at First Minister and deputy First Minister level rather than at my level.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the Minister for his statement, for taking questions and for his quick response to the variant over the last number of days. Given the significant increase in transmission in our communities, the uncertainties about this variant and, coming into Christmas, the increase in connection and interaction between people, are we looking at a potential circuit breaker in the new year? If so, Minister, at what point do you make that determination?

1.15 pm

Mr Swann: I hope that the steps that the Executive enacted and agreed at their last meeting, after which the deputy First Minister and I made a statement, will prevent us having to take those decisions. No one in the Executive, the Chamber or society wants us to have to take those actions. I encourage people, once again, to follow the advice that has come from my Department, through the Public Health Agency, and that was conveyed at the press conference with the deputy First Minister and me following the Executive's meeting last Wednesday. Ms Bradley also said about encouraging people to come forward and get their vaccines — should it be their first, second or third dose, their booster dose or the flu vaccine: all those actions help us to keep the economy open and society going. That takes a collective response and a single message from the Executive. We have seen it work in the past. I still believe, especially coming into Christmas and the new year, that if we are really determined to keep things open as they currently are, we have a collective responsibility to follow the guidance that is there.

Miss Woods: I thank the Minister for coming to the Chamber. In light of his statement and the

domestic certification that is coming in today and following on from Paula Bradley's comments, will the Minister outline to me, as a member of a non-Executive party, what the difference is, medically and scientifically, between licensed and unlicensed premises, if he is reconsidering that measure going forward and if he is looking at any further enforcement measures to deal with the spread of COVID-19?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. She will know from hearing me speak in the House that I usually do not disclose the content of papers that I have shared with Executive colleagues before they are shared more widely. The reason why we took the first step on licensed premises after engagement with stakeholders was that it is proving more difficult to have non-licensed premises in a position where measures could be mandated under the regulations, such as people being identified and COVID certification being managed or enforced. We have committed to further engagement with industry and stakeholders through the process that is led by the Executive's COVID task force to see how we can take a phased approach to the next steps that we take with the regulations.

Mr Carroll: Minister, given the new variant and some of the measures that you have mentioned, what discussion has taken place between you, the Finance Minister and other Ministers about financial protection? If we are to support people to isolate and work from home, there needs to be greater financial protection for them, especially given the increasing costs of fuel, food and everything else. What discussion has there been about finance?

Mr Swann: I thank the Member. The Executive had a conversation about the paper that was put forward on additional supports that could be put in place for those who have to isolate. The Member is aware of the loan that is available through the Department for Communities to support those who have to self-isolate. It is a non-repayable loan: it does not have to be paid back. Again, that advice and guidance is given out through the Public Health Agency in any conversations that it has with people to ask them to self-isolate because of not only the new variant but the delta variant.

Ms Sugden: I thank the Minister. The effectiveness of measures that have been announced today, and potentially in the future, will depend on compliance. However, the public are lethargic and confused, and they lack confidence in a publicly divided Government,

but, most importantly, they are worried about their livelihoods. Statutory sick pay is not enough for 10 days' self-isolation. It is in that context that you will make your decisions. I appreciate that public health is your primary concern. What support is being given to people, or, at least, being discussed around the Northern Ireland Executive table? How are you trying to get on one message? You talk of it, yet we have had no more press conferences. We do not see people coming together. We see Ministers fighting on Twitter. How do we get back to that one message, rather than just saying that we need to be there?

Mr Swann: I will give the Member her dues. The answer to her last question is that it is not easy. However, she will know that I am committed to being on a single message, because it is a single message that resonates not just from me and my Department but from everyone who works in the health service in its entirety. They have been at the forefront of this for the past 22 months and want to see collective leadership and a collective message because they know that that actually works. That is what gets through to the people of Northern Ireland.

I know that there are cynics who seek to detract from what happened towards the end of last week, but there was a sense of unity in the press conference that I held with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. It has been a while since such a press conference has happened, and I hope that people take some comfort from the fact that the three of us were there, giving as united a message as could have been delivered at that point.

We need people to refocus and re-energise their activity on the things that we know to work. It is about wearing face coverings. It is about good hand and respiratory hygiene. We all know that those things work. We have seen England reintroduce those things that we cautioned it about removing a number of months ago. At that point, some people said that we should have kept pace with England, but England is now reversing to where we have already been with those measures. We know that they work.

I come back to my previous comment that it is about utilising something that we did not have this time last year: the COVID vaccine. It is about making sure that people come forward and that we make it as easy and as accessible as possible for anyone to come forward for their first, second and booster doses, so that we can utilise the protection that the vaccines bring.

That is why I also appeal to those inside and outside the House who may declare themselves not to be anti-vaccine but whose message, as it is put out, deters people from getting the vaccine. They think that the message that they are being given — that dog whistle — shows that there is a level of support for them in the House that I do not believe is really there.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes questions to the Minister on his statement. I ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Executive Committee Business

Social Security (Terminal Illness) Bill: First Stage

Ms Hargey (The Minister for Communities): I beg to introduce the Social Security (Terminal Illness) Bill [47/17-22], which is a Bill to provide that special social security rules which apply where life expectancy is six months or less are instead to apply where life expectancy is 12 months or less.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I remind Members that debates on accelerated passage and Second Stage of the Bill are in the provisional Order Paper for Tuesday 7 December. If the Bill passes Second Stage, the deadline for amendments at Consideration Stage will be the following morning, Wednesday 8 December, at 9.30.

Health and Social Care Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Moved. — [Mr Swann (The Minister of Health).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Health and Social Care Bill today. Members will, of course, be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. Further Consideration Stage is, therefore, concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

I ask Members to take their ease for a few minutes.

Today's business has been moving faster than was originally anticipated. I therefore urge everyone to follow it closely.

Damages (Return on Investment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Moved. — [Mrs Long (The Minister of Justice).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

I again ask Members to take their ease for a few moments.

Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill: Further Consideration Stage

Moved. — [Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs).]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): No amendments have been tabled, so there is no opportunity to discuss the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill today. Members will be able to have a full debate at Final Stage. The Further Consideration Stage of the Horse Racing (Amendment) Bill is therefore concluded. The Bill stands referred to the Speaker.

Members can take their ease for a few moments before the next item of business.

1.30 pm

Apologies, Members, but there is a further delay. I propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend for five minutes.

The sitting was suspended at 1.34 pm and resumed at 1.38 pm.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair)

Committee Business

'Decarbonisation of Road Transport in Northern Ireland': Committee Report

Mr Buckley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I beg to move

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Infrastructure on its inquiry into the decarbonisation of road transport in Northern Ireland [NIA 136/17-22]; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure and her Executive colleagues to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Business Committee has agreed to allocate up to one hour and 30 minutes to the debate. The proposer of the motion will have 10 minutes in which to propose and 10 minutes in which to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes.

Mr Buckley: I commend the motion to the House. I rise as Chair of the Committee for Infrastructure to speak on the Committee's report on its inquiry into the decarbonisation of road transport in Northern Ireland. The Committee commends the report to Members but specifically asks for the endorsement of the House for its recommendations, which, taken together, seek a clear and detailed plan for moving towards 2030, when the sale of new petrol and diesel vehicles will be prohibited. I will outline the specifics of the recommendations, but first I will outline the work of the Department and, indeed, the Committee in coming to its conclusions.

At its meeting on 3 March 2021, the Committee for Infrastructure agreed to conduct an inquiry into the ambition to decarbonise road transport in Northern Ireland and our readiness to meet the Government's plans to prohibit the sale of new petrol and diesel cars from 2030 and plug-in hybrids from 2035. In order to gather evidence, the Committee conducted an online survey of the public and made a call for evidence from stakeholders involved in road transport, such as public transport operators, road haulage operators, public sector fleet managers and the 11 councils. The Committee also commissioned a series of research papers from the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) and took oral evidence from the Department and its stakeholders. The report

brings together an analysis of the evidence and the Infrastructure Committee's conclusions and recommendations. I will now outline its main findings.

I start with finding 1. As outlined in the report, in 2019, Northern Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions were estimated to be 21.4 million tons, 20% of which was from transport. The main source of those emissions was petrol and diesel vehicles on our roads. Furthermore, our evidence showed that over 70% of journeys were taken by car and that that had hardly changed in the last 20 years. We need a modal shift — a move away from car journeys to public transport and active travel, while recognising the rural aspects of our society and, in particular, the difficulties that rural people face with public transport options.

In its consideration of the Audit Office's 2015 report on the effectiveness of public transport in Northern Ireland, the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) called for investment and innovation and a stronger vision and leadership to deliver that modal shift. Six years later, this Committee makes the same call today. That is not to say that work has not been ongoing. The Committee acknowledges the increased spending on active travel and the development of services such as the Glider in Belfast in order to provide alternatives to car journeys. However, a holistic and long-term strategy is needed to guide our efforts. To that end, the Committee for Infrastructure recommends that the Department for Infrastructure's regional transport strategy and its policies and investment plans should be updated and enhanced, with a clear focus on how they will contribute to net zero ambitions.

I move on to finding 2. The Department for Transport (DfT) lists a modal shift to public and active transport as its number-one strategic priority. In its transport decarbonisation plan, it states that public transport and active travel:

"will be the natural first choice for our daily activities".

The Committee for Infrastructure recommends that the Department establish a new focus on transport decarbonisation and ensure that the necessary personnel and resources are in place to develop and implement the required plans. Furthermore, a clear timeline should be identified for when relevant policies and plans are expected to be in place.

I move on to finding 3. Members will be aware that a circular conundrum is at play with respect to the move to electric vehicles (EVs). On the

one hand, they are prohibitively expensive for most people — a fact that will change only as uptake increases and economies of scale drive prices down. On the other hand, as evidenced in the report, the charging infrastructure is inadequate, and, therefore, there is no incentive to persuade individuals to make the move to EVs, which the Committee has spent considerable time studying.

Northern Ireland's EV market has increased over the last 10 years. Although it has done so at a slower rate than the rest of the United Kingdom, it has grown at different rates throughout Northern Ireland. I am aware that all politics is local, so I draw Members' attention to map 1 in the report. The more rural the area, the less access there is to charging and, therefore, the less incentive there is to purchase an electric vehicle, given the much more complex journey plans when commuting from a rural location. The knock-on effect of that disincentive is the lack of a used EV market in Northern Ireland. As the House of Commons Select Committee on Transport has highlighted, a healthy used electric vehicle market has an important role in widening access to EV. Our report points to a growing recognition of that fact in many jurisdictions, leading to policies for the provision of grants or loans to support market entry. The Committee therefore recommends that the Executive bring forward measures to support and develop the used electric vehicle market in Northern Ireland.

1.45 pm

Finding 4 returns to the provision of EV charging infrastructure. The Committee acknowledges that the Department for Infrastructure has commissioned work to establish what charging infrastructure is needed in Northern Ireland, including where it should be located and the type of charging points that should be used. There is also a proposal for an EV infrastructure plan.

The Committee's survey and our call for evidence found consensus that the public charging infrastructure in Northern Ireland was inadequate for current demands and was only a fraction of what would be required if there was a significant uptake of EV in the coming years. One respondent to the survey commented:

"There has been zero engagement or investment from the Assembly to develop the public charging infrastructure. Any correspondence to try and prod them into action falls on lazy/deaf ears. The current

charging network is completely dilapidated and totally unfit for purpose. Department for Infrastructure need to get their act into gear if we have any hope of being ready for the fossil fuel vehicle ban."

Such is the disillusionment with the infrastructure that those who made the investment to buy EV said that they were thinking of reverting. To that end, the Committee recommends that the Department for Infrastructure engages immediately with EV owners to ensure that their views and experiences are built into an upgraded electric vehicle charging network.

I turn to finding 5. The Committee considered evidence for available funding streams for decarbonisation, in particular from the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles (OZEV). It notes that there is no commitment for the funding to continue beyond the end of next year. There seems to be little coordination in the availing of funding opportunities. The Committee came to the conclusion that confusion over which public body or bodies should lead on the issue may be leading to missed opportunities for drawing down funding. The Committee felt that funding opportunities may be going to waste through a lack of experience or knowledge in councils etc and that more engagement and coordination was needed to agree priorities. Therefore, DFI should engage with the Office for Zero Emission Vehicles, the Energy Saving Trust and councils to ensure that the unique circumstances of Northern Ireland are considered.

Our evidence shows that early public investment in infrastructure is necessary to stimulate EV uptake. It is only when that is at a sufficient level that a shift to private-sector operation, with decreasing government support, will occur. For that to happen, a funding package should be agreed that will bring the Northern Ireland charging network up to a fit-for-purpose and future-proofed standard. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the Department for Infrastructure engages with current and potential energy providers and other partners, particularly councils, to develop a charging infrastructure strategy and to agree a plan to fund it. Furthermore, the Department for Infrastructure should establish itself as the lead body for identifying and supporting available funding streams for charging.

When the Committee heard from Departments about their plans for vehicles within their remit, the state of readiness and forethought was a mixed bag, to say the least. The Committee says to all Departments that, on the issue, there

is no scope to say, "Do as we say, not as we do". The public sector must lead by example. Therefore, the Committee for Infrastructure recommends that the Northern Ireland Executive make a commitment that, where possible and practical, zero emission vehicles are the first choice.

I hope that, in the time available, I have given Members a sense of the Committee's deliberations and the rationale for its recommendations. I commend the report to the House and call for the Minister for Infrastructure and Executive colleagues to implement the recommendations contained therein.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Well timed. Thank you.

Mr Boylan: I support the motion and thank the Chair for the overview. I hope that the report does not just sit on the shelf like everything else. Debates will arise in the Chamber over the coming months, and I hope that the recommendations and findings from the report will be shared in regulations that come forward. I thank the research team and everybody associated with putting the report together, including the Committee staff.

As the Chair said, in March 2021 we launched an inquiry into decarbonising the North's road transport. We undertook and commissioned an extensive programme of evidence collection to inform the inquiry, including research, an online public survey and a call for evidence from key stakeholders.

Many of the findings of the report will not be surprising, but I will reiterate what we already know: we must adapt to a green and more sustainable transport system. The climate crisis must be tackled urgently. Failure to do so will cause harm to our communities and to future generations.

Transport accounts for around 23% of emissions in the North. Emissions from road traffic are also linked to conditions including strokes, heart disease, lung cancer and respiratory infections. Air pollution is a serious public health issue, no more so than in Armagh city, which is one of the worst-affected areas. It is clear that we need to transform the way we travel, but we need the infrastructure in place to make that a reality. That means delivering first-class public transport, committing to active travel infrastructure and encouraging the uptake of electric vehicles.

One key finding of the report is that the Department for Infrastructure must develop a

green transport policy in order to commit to a decarbonised transport system in the North. The strategy must clearly map out how the modal shift to public transport and active travel will contribute to achieving that goal. The delivery of a first-class public transport system needs to play a pivotal role in green transport policy. We need more people to use public transport as we work to reduce emissions and tackle the climate crisis. The best way to encourage people to do that is to improve our public transport network and make it easier for people to access public transport. For many workers and families, particularly those in rural areas, public transport is not an option, so, in order to make it easier for them, we must allow them to access public transport.

Whilst we welcome the efforts so far to decarbonise the bus fleet, we also need to look at decarbonising the rail network. We need to massively improve our current bus and rail network. Our current rail network could be improved by cutting journey times and increasing services, which would increase its appeal, and I welcome the Minister's intervention in the Armagh rail link feasibility study.

Active travel also needs to play a key role in our green transport policy. We are all aware of the massive positive impact that cycling can have on a person's health and well-being, as well as the environmental benefits of cutting carbon emissions and reducing pollution. Safety concerns when cycling are a huge deterrent to people taking up active travel. We need people to feel safer when cycling, and, in order to do that, we need to prioritise building dedicated cycle lanes as well as expanding greenways across the North. I will welcome the introduction of the Monaghan and Middletown greenway when it gets up and running. It is clear that having the right infrastructure in place is key to successfully promoting cycling, and it is clear that we need a gear change in government to greater prioritise cycling infrastructure. We need to promote walking and cycling for all generations. We need to encourage cycling in our schools, workplaces and communities across the North. There is already a lot of enthusiasm out there for cycling and walking, but people are stopped by the glaring lack of infrastructure.

I want to speak a wee bit about electric vehicles, but I am running out of time. The report also highlighted the need to make electric vehicles more accessible and affordable and stressed the need to develop a strong charge point network. I welcome some of the recent developments, such as the Electricity

Supply Board (ESB) receiving £3.27 million to expand —

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member draw his remarks to a close, please.

Mr Boylan: — and enhance the EV charging network. I support the motion and look forward to the Minister's response.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Members, as Question Time begins at 2.00 pm, I suggest that the House takes its ease until then. The debate will continue after Question Time, when the next Member to speak will be Cara Hunter.

The debate stood suspended.

2.00 pm

(Mr Speaker in the Chair)

Oral Answers to Questions

The Executive Office

Mr Speaker: Question 11 has been withdrawn.

Communities in Transition: Update

1. **Mr Butler** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the Communities in Transition (CIT) project. (AQO 2795/17-22)

Mr Givan: Communities in Transition is a vital element of the Executive's work to tackle paramilitarism, criminality and organised crime. The programme continues to have a transformative impact on communities and is making a positive difference in people's lives. It is increasing the number of people participating in community life, improving skills and confidence and reducing the space in which paramilitaries and criminal elements can operate.

As with the rest of the Executive's tackling paramilitary activity, criminality and organised crime programme, the Communities in Transition project has moved on to its second phase of activity. That phase will last until March 2024 and will be supported with an initial contribution of £10 million over that period. We will continue to consider options to augment that budget, where possible.

In May of this year, a series of public procurement competitions was initiated that resulted in the award of 22 new interventions. More recently, two further interventions were awarded, while others are being evaluated.

Mr Butler: I take the opportunity to congratulate the former First Minister and former leader of the Democratic Unionist Party on taking up a position with Co-operation Ireland, which is a stakeholder in the project.

First Minister, work undertaken during years of tackling intergenerational issues related to the Troubles has identified our young people as being the most adversely affected by paramilitarism and radicalisation. That correlates with areas where there are low levels of educational attainment. What steps are being taken to address educational

underachievement in identified areas as a key to unlocking a future that is free from the chains of fear and hatred?

Mr Givan: The Member is right: one of the key ways in which we can try to help young people is through that educational approach, particularly when it comes to underachievement. He will know the work that is taking place in our own constituency through the Resurgam Trust and its early intervention project, which is now yielding real, tangible benefits. He is right to highlight that.

This is also about employability and giving people the opportunity to gain employment, and that is a key part of the work that is ongoing in the eight CIT areas.

Mr Delargy: As the Minister will know, the Communities in Transition project was recommendation B4 of the Executive's action plan 'Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime' and is part of a package to support transition. The delivery of recommendation B4 is going well. Will the Minister now commit to ensuring that progress is also made on the Executive's commitment to adopt the recommendations of the review panel to amend the Fair Employment and Treatment Order 1998?

Mr Givan: The Member is right to highlight again from where employment opportunities can be gained. I know that that legislation has been raised as an issue, but it is still under consideration. The Member highlighted the point that recommendations were made on that, but legislative change will be required if those are to be taken forward.

Mr Robinson: Will the First Minister give his assessment of the recent meeting with the institutions about financial contributions?

Mr Givan: I think that that might be for a later question on historical institutional abuse. I will answer it when we get to that question.

Mr Robinson: OK.

Mrs D Kelly: The First Minister gave the Communities in Transitions project a glowing report, and there is undoubtedly some good work going on. I wonder, however, whether an independent review of the work of the project is needed to look at who exactly benefits from it and at whether the outcomes are meeting its overall objectives.

Mr Givan: An evaluation has been done of what was the first phase of the project, a report on which is in the latter stages of being drafted. There will therefore be that work to review the impact that the initial phase has had, and it will shape the second phase. Those are difficult areas in which people are having to work. They are trying to assist communities to transition and to undermine the corrosive power that paramilitary organisations have had in communities for far too long. It will require considered and painstaking efforts, and it will take time to see the benefits being realised, but there is evidence that those efforts have made a positive impact in parts of Northern Ireland.

Platinum Jubilee

2. **Mrs Barton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what plans their Department has to celebrate the platinum jubilee of Her Majesty The Queen in February 2022. (AQO 2796/17-22)

Mr Givan: The Executive Office was not able to reach an agreed response to the question.

Mrs Barton: First Minister, I understand that a number of UK-wide projects are in development, as you will see if you look at some of the questions asked in Westminster by your colleague Carla Lockhart. Can you advise the House where in Northern Ireland those events will take place?

Mr Givan: It is a remarkable achievement that Her Majesty The Queen will celebrate her platinum jubilee next year. I am sure that many throughout Northern Ireland are looking forward to witnessing that historic and unprecedented event. The Northern Ireland Office is engaging with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on the plans to mark the platinum jubilee, and I anticipate further information on those.

I understand that the main focus of the jubilee celebrations will be from 2 June to 5 June, which will include a bank holiday that will be observed in Northern Ireland. That will provide an opportunity for organisations and local communities to design their own events to mark the occasion. I look forward to the opportunities that we will have to mark that historic event. I know that Departments will look at that. We see the local councils as being one area in which support will be provided. It is right that we mark that very significant occasion in our history.

Mrs Dodds: People across Northern Ireland will be appalled, and rightly so, that the

Executive Office has not been able to agree a response to such a simple question about how we will celebrate Her Majesty's remarkable years on the throne.

Does the First Minister agree that that is just another one of those Sinn Féin tactics that causes great hurt and harm among those in the community in general in Northern Ireland who respect and show loyalty to Her Majesty? Will the First Minister commit to further engagement to see whether there can be a fund for communities in Northern Ireland to properly recognise that important occasion?

Mr Givan: I am disappointed that there was not agreement in the Executive Office for a response to be officially communicated on my behalf and that of the deputy First Minister. However, that is for others to explain.

It is right that we mark the occasion. It will be a test of how republicans and nationalists in particular recognise and facilitate those in our community who want to pay tribute and celebrate what is a historic occasion for Her Majesty The Queen. Many people talk about respect, equality and celebrating diversity. It will be a test for Sinn Féin. How will it do that? How will it facilitate those who want to mark the occasion to do so? We had evidence when it came to marking the centenary on the estate: it was blocked. After some good work by those in Sinn Féin who reached out to and met members of the royal family, I hope that they are not now recanting and taking a backward step. Let us hope that we are not moving to that position.

Mr Allister: Is there not a pattern here? The Sinn Féin Communities Minister has already refused a community fund to mark the jubilee, the Sinn Féin Finance Minister has refused to allow a tree to be planted in the grounds of Stormont, and now the deputy First Minister completes the trilogy of bigotry by blocking moves in the Executive Office. Does the First Minister agree that all the talk and platitudes about respect reek of hypocrisy from Sinn Féin and the deputy First Minister when weighed against those actions? As for the First Minister —

Mr Speaker: Will the Member get to a question, please?

Mr Allister: — in the office that he holds, he is unable to do anything about this. Is he in office but not in power?

Mr Givan: The Member is right to keep the focus on where it should be, and that is to challenge republicans when it comes to the marking of this important celebration. That is where the focus should be, rather than on taking an opportunity to have a go on other issues. The Member may well be within his rights to do that, but let us keep the focus on where it is. He has highlighted, as I have, a number of opportunities that Sinn Féin has had to show respect, and it has not met the bar. I hope that it can reflect. This will be a test for it. Again, I am always an optimist that we can work these things out. There is clearly a need to have proper recognition of this important event, and Sinn Féin, as part of the Executive, has an important role in doing that. Let us see over the coming weeks whether it is able to meet that test and show the respect and equality that it has often talked of as being required of other people.

Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry: Update

3. **Mr Boylan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the delivery of the recommendations in the report of the Historical Institutional Abuse (HIA) inquiry. (AQO 2797/17-22)

8. **Mr Stewart** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation of the recommendations made in the report of the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry, chaired by Sir Anthony Hart. (AQO 2802/17-22)

14. **Mr McCrossan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, further to the recommendations of the report of the Historical Institutional Abuse inquiry in 2017, when the apology will be made to survivors. (AQO 2808/17-22)

Mr Givan: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 3, 8 and 14 together. The HIA redress board opened to applications at the end of March last year. By the end of October, the board had received 2,100 applications for redress and had paid out over £26 million to applicants or their solicitors. Last week, the junior Ministers and I met the president of the board, Judge Huddleston, to discuss the work of the board and its engagement with victims and survivors. Responding to the issues raised by victims and survivors, the deputy First Minister and I have approved the terms of reference for the review of the HIA redress process, and the review should commence in the next few weeks.

In relation to the six institutions identified by the Hart report as being required to make contributions towards the cost of the redress scheme, we held a round-table discussion on 14 October that focused on progressing negotiations on contributions. The independent facilitator, Paul Sweeney, has met all six institutions and is continuing his engagements with victims and survivors' groups.

The delivery of an apology to victims and survivors remains a priority. We are giving consideration to the format and content of the apology, including how the review of the redress process might impact the delivery of the apology. Ministerial and official-level engagement with representative groups is ongoing. We are determined that victims and survivors will receive the acknowledgement, support and redress that they deserve, and we remain committed to the implementation of all the recommendations in the Hart report.

Mr Boylan: Does the Minister recognise the importance of a formal apology to those who suffered historical institutional abuse? Does he acknowledge the importance of engaging victims and survivors' groups in the apology process?

Mr Givan: The Member makes a point that victims and survivors have made repeatedly to us: the official apology is very important and they ought to be at the very centre of that apology. We want to see that delivered, and delivered in a timely way, but we need to make sure that the victims and survivors feel ownership of that process. I know that, with the review of the redress board, there had been some issues about proceeding with an apology. We are in a better place to address those concerns, which should allow us to move forward when it comes to making this official apology. It is important that we get the detail of that right and that we get the moment right when that is delivered.

Mr Stewart: We often hear about a victim-centred process, and, for victims and survivors of historical abuse, an apology was key to that. I spoke to a victim and survivor earlier today, and they said to me:

"We need a break, John, from having to constantly apply pressure on them to do a job that should have been sorted years ago. They took their hand off the wheel and left victims once again having to fight for justice — justice that they promised us in 2011 and 2016. Unreliable, untrustworthy. We tried to put our trust in government, but they have

once again abused it and let us down in the way that government, state and church let us down in the past".

How is this a victim-centred process, Mr First Minister?

Mr Givan: There has been engagement at official level and at ministerial level on this, and engagements were held in September and October. Work was also done with the commissioner.

Junior Ministers Middleton and Kearney also recently met victims and survivors' groups, and there was a commitment that there would be continued and regular engagement at both ministerial and official level as work progresses in preparation for the apology being made. There is absolutely no issue with our commitment to ensuring that victims and survivors are very much at the centre of this process.

2.15 pm

Mr Speaker: I stress the importance of Members moving to their question without a long introduction.

Mr McCrossan: I thank the First Minister for his answer. He covered the question about the apology well. First Minister, will you undertake to work with the commissioner to ensure that you reach out to the many victims and survivors out there and that that is done appropriately?

Mr Givan: The commissioner has a very important role and engages with groups and victims on this issue. The commissioner has an important role on our Executive Office team. We will re-emphasise the point that the Member made about the importance of her role in this process.

Ms Bradshaw: First Minister, how satisfied or assured are you that the commissioner has enough resources in her office to deal with all the queries from victims and survivors?

Mr Givan: The budget for the commissioner's office for this financial year is just short of £800,000. It is supported from within the Executive Office, which helps to support staffing arrangements and the governance and infrastructure that is required in her office. If there are issues of resources being required that have not been brought to our attention, we obviously want to know, but we are advised that the required support is being provided to the

commissioner, Fiona Ryan, to enable her to do her job.

Mr Robinson: My apologies, Mr Speaker. What is the First Minister's assessment of the recent meeting with the institutions about financial contributions? My apologies again.

Mr Givan: This is an important piece of work that we have had the independent facilitator, Paul Sweeney, take forward. Paul Sweeney is a former permanent secretary, but he is absolutely independent and has expertise on this issue. He has met the six institutions. We anticipate an official report from Paul Sweeney in due course, which will provide us with feedback from the institutions. Victims and survivors have said that having financial contributions come from the institutions is very important as part of that acknowledgement. We hope to receive a report from Paul Sweeney about that engagement shortly.

Ms McLaughlin: I go back to the apology process, I am afraid. Last Wednesday, the Committee for the Executive Office received a briefing from the commissioner in which she recommended that the redress and review should be decoupled from the apology. Based on that recommendation, can you set a date on which the victims and survivors will receive a heartfelt apology from this state?

Mr Givan: The Member is right that those two issues have had some overlap. We believe that progress has been made towards decoupling that to allow the work to go forward. An apology project group has been set up. It includes officials, survivors of institutional child abuse and the Victims and Survivors Service (VSS). A proper group is taking it forward. That group is discussing the practical arrangements and has been focused on ensuring that those victims and survivors are supported before, during and after the apology process.

COVID Status Certification: Domestic Settings

4. **Mr Irwin** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to outline what discussions they have had with the Minister of Health and other ministerial colleagues regarding the introduction of the COVID status certification in domestic settings. (AQO 2798/17-22)

Mr Givan: The Executive met on 17 November and discussed the issue of COVID status certification. At that meeting, agreement in principle was reached for the introduction of

certification to begin on 29 November, with an initial two-week grace period, followed by enforcement beginning on 12 December. The primary focus of COVID status certification is on indoor and outdoor events, nightclubs, licensed hospitality and other premises that permit the consumption of intoxicating liquor, including cinemas, theatres and conference centres. The Minister of Health brought an additional paper to the Executive on 22 November to discuss other contingency measures in the autumn/winter plan and how those could be deployed in tandem with certification.

Mr Irwin: I thank the First Minister for his response. When were you advised by the Health Minister that he was having difficulties with putting into legislation the obligations that he wanted for cafes and coffee shops?

Mr Givan: It was on Friday that the Minister of Health provided a paper to Executive colleagues on the issues around non-licensed hospitality and the inability to get regulations drafted so that they would be enforceable. That led to the subsequent public announcements from the Minister of Health about those forms of hospitality not being included in the decisions that had been taken by a majority of the members of the Executive in respect of COVID certification.

Mr Gildernew: Minister, we are still in the midst of an unprecedented health crisis, and we are, potentially, facing a very difficult winter that threatens to pile more pressure on an already beleaguered health and social care system. Maintaining strong public health messaging will be crucial to protecting our health service in the time ahead. Will the First Minister give a commitment that we will see no more intemperate or ill-judged outbursts from outliers in his party, who seem determined to undermine the public health messaging?

Mr Givan: It is important that the Executive do the right things and focus their energy and efforts on the measures that will have real, tangible benefits. That is why I continue to encourage people who have not been vaccinated to take up the vaccine and those who have not received their booster jab to take it. We, collectively, re-emphasised the important messaging about personal responsibility and actions that we can all take. However, the issue of mandatory COVID certification processes was a politically driven decision. It was not evidence-based. That is what has brought the Executive in to controversy. I warned at the time that, rather than engaging in divisive and distracting policies, we should focus on the

measures that will see real benefits. Instead of there being a thought-out, orderly plan to make COVID certification happen, there was a last-minute scramble from the parties in government. They have produced legislation to be rushed through this week that is discriminatory and ill-thought-out, and which many will regard as unenforceable. Those are not my words; they are the words of Mary Lou McDonald.

Ms Bailey: Has the First Minister attended any events or venues where he had to provide any certification? If so, will he tell us about how straightforward and non-discriminatory that process was?

Mr Givan: There have been occasions. There was a dinner for the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry in the Waterfront Hall, where, upon entry, I was asked for my COVID certification, which I happily provided. That was a straightforward process for a dinner at which there were, I think, around 600 people. Measures had been put in place; we were well distanced in a well-ventilated room. That is what we, as an Executive, have been saying. I said last week that I want places to be able to stay open and operate safely. People should take personal responsibility. When they are moving about, they should, where it is required by regulations, wear a face covering.

There are examples that I can cite that have worked well, where measures have been put in place voluntarily. It is a very different proposition when a Government move from voluntary approaches to mandating it, including, for example, for coffee shops that have 15 people as their maximum capacity, compared with a stadium that could take over 20,000. They will be subjected to the same level of financial penalty as large-scale organisers. That is disproportionate, but, even more worryingly, it is not evidence-based. No equality impact assessment was carried out. No legal advice was provided to the Executive about human rights. There was no assessment of the effectiveness or otherwise of reducing transmission. However, that was the decision on which a majority of the parties proceeded.

That was the wrong approach, but I re-emphasise all the other points: get your vaccination; take up the booster jab; and practice personal responsibility. Those will be the most effective measures, rather than a divisive and distractive policy that political parties put through because of a political agenda instead of an evidence-based approach.

Mr Allister: Will the First Minister clarify two things? Was the project for certification, as approved by the Executive, to be implemented on a rolling basis, as now appears to be the case? When will the House be voting on the regulations?

Mr Givan: No phased introduction was voted for by the majority of Executive members. The scheme was to cover hospitality in all its forms where food and drink was being served. The Department of Health's characterisation of that as a phased introduction is not reflective of what the majority of the Executive voted for. It is important that, when people speak about this, they give the accurate position that the Executive voted upon. I understand the argument being made by Minister Swann that, because of the rushed nature of the policy, his Department has not been able to bottom out the regulations for unlicensed coffee shops and hospitality.

I want the Assembly to vote on the regulations before the measures commence. Again, I am seeking clarity on that because the Department of Health said that the regulations would be published on Friday of last week, then it was going to be Monday and now they are in draft form. It appears that the regulations have not been made in law yet; therefore, I am not clear on whether the clock started ticking today on the grace period that should come two weeks later. The Assembly should vote on the regulations, and I understand that that should happen next week.

I appeal to the other parties to reflect on the decisions that they have taken. There are opportunities not to proceed, and the Minister of Health, as my Economy Minister advocated, should not proceed on the issue. Other colleagues will have an opportunity to vote on the regulations. I will vote against them, which is consistent with what I did in the Executive, but I appeal to other colleagues to reflect on their positions and to vote against the regulations when they come before the Assembly.

Mr McGrath: The First Minister mentioned that there are "divisive", destructive and "distractive" policies being pursued by others. Does he not agree that his own party members are being divisive and destructive and are distracting from what should be a clear and concise public message in the middle of a global pandemic? We should ensure the safety of our citizens and not create confusion and bluster, and that applies to some of the rogue Ministers in his midst.

Mr Givan: I agree with the Member about the need for consistency and a collective approach, but six other Ministers decided to pursue not a collective approach but a policy that was not based on evidence. The Members opposite raise their eyebrows. Their party is one of civil rights, yet no equality impact assessment was carried out and no human rights or legal opinion was provided to the Executive before the decision was taken. There will be much more buy-in from the public on decisions that were based upon evidence. There is no evidence on the effectiveness of mandatory COVID vaccine passports in reducing transmission. The public expect us to take evidence-based decisions, and doing so will gain collective and consensual approaches.

Mr Speaker: I call Keith Buchanan. You will probably not get to ask a supplementary question.

COP26: Implications for Northern Ireland

5. **Mr K Buchanan** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for their assessment of the implications for Northern Ireland of the outcomes of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties. (AQO 2799/17-22)

Mr Givan: There are implications for Northern Ireland and the Executive. COP26 agreed plans to reduce the use of coal and fossil fuels globally, which will help to keep within reach the challenging target to limit global warming to 1.5°C. There is now a plan for moving forward, and every country must produce its own plans by the end of next year.

The implications for us are that we must play our part in contributing to those targets by making the necessary changes to what we do and by fully implementing our green growth, energy, environment and cleaner transport strategies. We will also look to share and learn from best practice on the challenges of climate change, and we will discuss that with some of our other overseas partners in the coming weeks.

COP26 recognised that there is a lot of work to be done, but we are committed to our strategies and plans for the way forward.

Mr Speaker: A very brief question and response, please.

Mr K Buchanan: OK, thank you, Mr Speaker. What representation was there from Northern

Ireland at COP26 and how did that come across to you?

Mr Givan: Northern Ireland put its best foot forward at COP26. Attendees included organisations such as the Armagh Observatory and Planetarium; the Northern Ireland Environment Link; Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful; Artemis Technologies from my constituency; Wrightbus; the Ulster Farmers' Union; the Northern Ireland Environment Agency; and public representatives included the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and Danske Bank. All those organisations and more represented Northern Ireland in a positive light. They showed the kinds of strategies that we are taking forward, that we recognise the seriousness of the issue and that we are making real, tangible differences to tackling our contribution towards climate change.

2.30 pm

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions. We will move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Bill of Rights: Panel of Experts

T1. **Ms Armstrong** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide an update on the process to appoint a panel of experts on a bill of rights, given that she was interested to hear the First Minister talking about equality and he will be aware that the Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights has suspended its meetings until such a panel can be appointed by the Executive Office. (AQT 1831/17-22)

Mr Givan: It is for the Assembly's Ad Hoc Committee to decide whether it wishes to continue to do its work. It should not be predicated on that issue. The Ad Hoc Committee is at liberty to get its own expert advice, which, I believe, it has done, on its approach to tackling that legislation.

Ms Armstrong: I am somewhat surprised by that answer, First Minister. What, then, will you and the deputy First Minister do to ensure that the New Decade, New Approach commitment to deliver a bill of rights is not breached?

Mr Givan: The Ad Hoc Committee has been taking forward that work. I look forward to seeing the completed report from the Committee. That will help to shape the next steps.

COVID-19: Hospitalisations

T2. **Mr Dunne** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on hospitalisations owing to COVID-19. (AQT 1832/17-22)

Mr Givan: The Member rightly raises the issue, which we all know about, of the pressures facing our health service. Indeed, it was because of that issue that the Health Minister brought forward and other parties supported the proposition for COVID passports.

Nobody should be complacent. We should all make every possible effort. When I look at the current levels of hospitalisation, however, I think that people can have hope. We need to give people hope rather than constant anxiety and fear. As of today, 318 beds are occupied by people who have COVID; that is a significant reduction from where we were even a week ago. We have 28 people in intensive care; at the end of the late summer, that figure was 49. We have had a reduction in the number of people in ICU and of occupied beds. At one point during the current wave, we had a peak of 527 inpatients; today, the number is 340.

I commend those who are making efforts and taking up the booster jab, because we are now seeing the differences in our hospitals. We are seeing them even in our care homes: in September, there were 135 outbreaks; that is now down to 32. The evidence shows that the measures that are being taken through the roll-out of the booster campaign — we need to see it accelerated and more taken up — are having a real impact on the pressures in our health service.

That is why I go back to the question. The introduction of mandatory COVID passports was based on the pressures in our health service, but those pressures, today, are less than they were even a week ago. We need to continue to monitor that, but, based on the evidence, the question that needs to be asked is this: why are we pursuing a mandatory scheme when we have had those reductions in our hospitals' rate of intensive care and general bed occupancy and of cases in our nursing homes?

Mr Dunne: I thank the First Minister for his answer. If the numbers have been stabilising, why was there such a rush to implement mandatory COVID vaccine passports?

Mr Givan: Those in the pro-passport party coalition need to answer that question. Why

pursue a divisive, distracting policy that is not based on the evidence of hospitalisations and the pressures in our health service? I continue to appeal to people: take personal responsibility and increase your efforts to get your booster jab, because that is having a real, tangible benefit. Other Members have an opportunity to reflect on the position that they have taken. I hope that they do that and that the regulations are not brought forward, but, if they are, I hope that the Assembly will vote them down.

Mr Speaker: Alex Easton is not in his place.

Ministerial Code: Planning Decisions

T4. **Mrs D Kelly** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, following the judgement by Justice Scofield on 19 October in relation to ministerial authority under the Executive Committee (Functions) Act (NI) 2020, to outline the reason for the delay in bringing forward proposals to amend the ministerial code to provide legal certainty for planning decisions taken by the Infrastructure Minister and to give a clear commitment to take that forward urgently. (AQT 1834/17-22)

Mr Givan: The Member raises an important point. The Minister for Infrastructure corresponded with the Executive Office on the outworkings of that judgement. It is important that there can be agreement on the ministerial code in order to clarify the issue, particularly for the Minister for Infrastructure. I have cleared a submission in the Executive Office for that to be taken forward, and we are awaiting final sign-off in the Executive for that, but I would like to be able to bring that submission to the Executive as soon as possible.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the First Minister for his response. I hope that an answer will be given sooner rather than later, because we all know about the importance of infrastructure in driving forward the economy. Can he provide any update on the establishment of the commission for infrastructure?

Mr Givan: That is a piece of work that the permanent secretary in the Executive Office is taking forward. He is engaging with the other Departments so that we can assess what such a commission would look like. Work is taking place to ensure that there is no duplication in having an infrastructure commission. It is therefore an active piece of work that is the Executive Office is taking forward.

NIPSA/UCU Industrial Action

T5. **Mr Carroll** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what message the First Minister will send to NIPSA-affiliated education welfare officers and University and College Union-affiliated lecturers and education workers as they embark on industrial action this week. (AQT 1835/17-22)

Mr Givan: I missed the last part of that question, but, as a general school of thought, I always believe that it is best to get agreed negotiated outcomes rather than to resort to industrial action. Industrial action should always be an absolute last resort for any sector to take. I hope that we are able to get an agreed way forward on the particular issue that the Member has raised.

Mr Carroll: It is disappointing that the Minister could not say that he supports workers' taking action. Workers are calling for the Education Minister to intervene to fund the pay disparity that the education welfare officers face. They are calling for the Economy Minister to intervene to pressure universities into making sure that workers are not paid low wages. Will the First Minister intervene to make sure that both those Ministers act to resolve the workers' issues?

Mr Givan: I absolutely support workers' rights, particularly in education. Teachers, or, in this case, welfare support officers and university or further education college lecturers, carry out hugely important work. They are highly respected and regarded in society, and it is vital that they be appropriately remunerated for the work that they carry out. I therefore hope that there can be a resolution to the issues that the Member has raised in the Assembly, because it is important that those in our teaching community are able to get on with delivering the job that they want to do.

Multi-year Budget

T6. **Mr Newton** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work has been done to put in place the necessary mechanisms for a three-year Budget, given that, over the past 12 to 18 months in the Chamber, Members have argued for a three-year Budget, which has been largely accepted. (AQT 1836/17-22)

Mr Givan: The Member is right about the importance of having a multi-year Budget to facilitate more strategic planning rather than living year-to-year. As a result of the

comprehensive spending review (CSR) that the Chancellor announced, we now know the allocation that Northern Ireland will receive in each of the next three years. Yes, it is an increase in our Budget. Not everything is being funded that we want to be able to do, however. That, then, requires the Executive to really look at our priorities. I assure the Member that work has been carried out to assess that three-year allocation of both recurrent and capital funding. There is an ongoing process across Departments to take that forward.

Mr Newton: The Minister mentioned having a strategic approach. In the past, with one-year Budgets, the reaction has been to pump more and more money into Health. Given the strategic planning that we will now have with a multi-year Budget, how will Health be treated over the three rolling years?

Mr Givan: We all know the pressures that the health service is under. It is the number-one priority for me and my party. That view is shared across the Executive. The funding allocations that would be made — indeed, that are proposed — for the next three years give that priority to Health. We all agree that things like tackling the waiting lists for elective-care procedures need to be taken forward. We also need the transformation of the health service to take place so that we do not just treat the symptoms of a system that is unable to cope. In addition to addressing the waiting-list backlog, there needs to be financial support to deliver that transformation of the health service. That will be reflected when the Budget is published for consultation. Ministers will discuss it again at the Executive on Thursday. I hope that we will be in a position soon to put it out to public consultation to get people's views before we agree the final settlement.

Protocol: Difficulties

T7. **Mr Humphrey** asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the First Minister's assessment of the efforts over the weekend to highlight the ongoing problems that the protocol is causing for Northern Ireland, in the light of the fact that, over the past weeks, he has spoken to two contractors — one is building a park in North Belfast to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland, the other is building private housing in the constituency — with both saying that they are having problems in getting materials to fulfil their contracts. (AQT 1837/17-22)

Mr Givan: It is causing problems for many businesses' supply chains for goods or, as in

this case, materials. Contractors are having issues with trying to source materials. That is not unique to Northern Ireland. I have no doubt that the protocol has had implications for accessing goods. However, there is a worldwide demand on goods, particularly timber, because of infrastructure projects that are being taken forward on a huge scale in places such as the United States. Those are buying up the available materials and pushing up prices right across the globe.

The Member is right to highlight the difficulties that contractors are having in getting materials, which are contributing to delays in build programmes and increasing costs. That is why the Executive agreed to a more flexible approach, on a case-by-case basis, when it comes to procurement so that projects were not lost due to cost inflation. Departments are working with contractors to ensure that they can continue to deliver those projects.

Mr Humphrey: I thank the First Minister for his answer. The Jewish community in Northern Ireland is having ongoing problems with getting kosher meat. That issue has been raised all the way to the Prime Minister. I thank your predecessor for the work that she did on the issue. However, the problem is ongoing, as is the supply of trees to mark the centenary of Northern Ireland and to create the Queen's canopy. Those issues are affecting people negatively right across the community in Northern Ireland. Can the First Minister assure the House that work will continue to ensure that the protocol and the difficulties that it is causing will be removed?

Mr Givan: The Member raises an important point. Whilst having kosher meat is not a priority for a huge majority of the population, for an important part of the community — the Jewish community — it is. I have raised that issue with UK Secretaries of State. Disturbingly, when they have raised it with Europe as being a result of the protocol, they have been alarmed at the response that they have had, and, at times, the dismissive nature and lack of understanding of the impact that it is having on the Jewish community. I know from the Member's representation and from speaking to the Rabbi in Belfast, that the issue is having real impact on the very small Jewish community because of its absolute importance to them and their beliefs.

That is one issue.

The Queen's Canopy is another issue that relates to our ability to get the trees into

Northern Ireland. Beyond that, the points are well made about the diversion of trade as a result of the protocol and the wider societal impact that it has. For all those reasons, we need to see a resolution in the process between the UK Government and the European Union.

2.45 pm

Mr Speaker: Members, time is up. Please take your ease for a moment or two.

Mr Kearney: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I wish to raise a point of order in relation to question 2, if I may.

Mr Speaker: We do not normally take points of order until Question Time is over.

Mr Kearney: Can you advise how the matter can be placed on the record?

Mr Speaker: I will speak to you immediately after Question Time.

Mr Kearney: OK. With your indulgence, I would appreciate it if that could be properly recorded.

Mr Speaker: It will be.

Mr Kearney: Thank you.

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Mr Speaker: Questions 7 and 9 have been withdrawn.

Animal Welfare: Port of Larne

1. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what steps he is taking to ensure the welfare of animals at the Port of Larne. (AQO 2809/17-22)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs): Welfare checks on all animals moving through Larne port are conducted by a veterinary-led portal inspection team. In relation to imports, all farmed livestock are unloaded at approved facilities, where a detailed veterinary health and welfare assessment is completed before any onward travel is permitted. For other species, the same general rules apply to welfare checks. Those animals, however, are generally inspected on the vehicle and unloaded only if a welfare problem is suspected. In addition,

documentary checks are completed as part of the overall welfare assessment to ensure that the vehicle is approved and fit for purpose, the attendants are competent and the journey is in line with legislative parameters.

For animals moving to Great Britain through Larne port, a general welfare assessment is conducted on all consignments to ensure compliance with the relevant welfare legislation before onward travel is permitted. Those checks are in addition to similar checks completed by the certifying official veterinarian (OV) at the premises of origin. For dogs, an assessment is made of the animals' fitness to travel and the conditions of travel only where it is a commercial transaction or there are more than five animals being transported. The same documentary checks as for livestock relating to the transporter and the vehicle apply to the transport of dogs.

Should any adverse findings be disclosed during welfare inspections, all affected animals will be detained and treated in accordance with the nature of the findings. An associated range of enforcement measures are available to Department officials, including formal notices, a penalty-based system for transport authorisation, disqualification and potential prosecution.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your answer. You halted an application for an equine and other commercial transportation of animals facility at Redlands Road in Larne. Can you assure the House that, with the additional inspections that are required, the appropriate level of animal welfare is being maintained? When will you allow the expansion of the current equine and other animals facility at Redlands Road, as per the planning application?

Mr Poots: Were there welfare issues, my veterinarians — people who specialise in animal welfare — would be obliged to draw them to my attention, and they have not done that. If they have those issues, I am sure that they will draw them to my attention.

Mr Beggs: Ewe lambs have been stranded in Scotland, there have been restrictions on movements to agricultural shows, and there has been much talk of easing and removing the restrictions. How many live animals have come into Northern Ireland from GB, and how many have gone from Northern Ireland to GB? When will all the new regulations be printed, so that we understand what is being proposed?

Mr Poots: I will clarify for the Member that livestock checks have taken place at the port of Larne for around 20 years, and certainly since the foot-and-mouth outbreak. Those checks ensure that the fine animal health status that we have here is maintained and should not be confused with the impact of the Northern Ireland protocol. However, the European Union has made it incredibly difficult for people who show livestock in Great Britain. That has been hugely damaging to the pedigree sector and, indeed, for the important importation of lambs from Scotland, which generally happens at this time of the year and augments our hill farms in particular. Considerable work has been done by veterinary officials to deal with all of those issues. My veterinary officials have proved to the European Union, beyond all reasonable doubt, that this causes no danger, impact or harm to the European Union's single market and, therefore, at this stage, any potential delays are political delays.

Mr McGuigan: I will follow on from the two previous questions. In the interests of animal welfare, can the Minister confirm that he has enough veterinary staff in the Department to carry out the checks at Larne?

Mr Poots: Yes, we have. It would be illogical to transfer veterinary staff to carry out checks on, for example, groupage, where a lorry carries maybe 300 different food items to be used in a store such as Sainsbury's that does not have a base in the Republic of Ireland. Yet, that is being requested of us. If the Member believes that checking such goods, which pose no threat to the European Union's single market, would be a good use of a veterinarian's time, as opposed to dealing with issues such as bovine TB, Johne's disease and the many other issues that are looked after by the Department's vets, he should stand up and say that. I do not think that it is a good use of a veterinarian's time.

Mr O'Toole: Will the Minister agree with me and confirm, as he did earlier, that there have always been animal health checks at the port of Larne and the Irish Sea and, that, if some people got their way and we put a border for sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) goods on the island of Ireland, farmers in this place would face two sets of checks: one when moving goods onto the island of Ireland and another when moving goods from Northern Ireland into the Republic? Clearly, we all want to see checks minimised, but, given that checks have already existed at seaports, does it not make sense to consolidate them in one location?

Mr Poots: A considerable element of the checks on live animals have always taken place. I have indicated that I am happy to assist the European Union to ensure that goods with the potential risk of entering the Republic of Ireland are checked on its behalf. They should pay for that, mind you, because it prevents goods from entering the European Union through Ireland, and those checks should not be paid for from our purse. Nonetheless, we do not have to do those checks at Newry or the Fermanagh border; they can be done elsewhere. They do not have to be done at the ports either. However, we can do that, and that should be separated from the goods that are to remain in Northern Ireland. There should be no internal barriers between Great Britain and Northern Ireland in that circumstance.

Farm-produced Food: Fair Prices

2. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what measures his Department has in place to ensure farmers receive a fair price for the food they produce. (AQO 2810/17-22)

Mr Poots: I am committed to raising the issue of fairness for all farmers in the marketplace. However, the price that farmers receive for their produce and that others pay, at any point in the food supply chain, is a commercial matter and therefore not within my remit. I am pleased that Northern Ireland dairy processors, farmers and stakeholders had the opportunity to make their views heard on how contracts are used in the sector through the 2020 UK-wide consultation on contractual arrangements in the dairy sector. The aim is to promote transparency and to improve the position of the primary producer in the dairy supply chain. That consultation was led by DEFRA, as the regulation of anticompetitive practices, including the regulation of contractual relationships, is a reserved matter, under schedule 3(26) to the Northern Ireland Act 1998. My officials will continue to work with DEFRA to further explore the Northern Ireland-specific issues and to ensure that any UK legislation in the area would be appropriate for the Northern Ireland sector.

Regarding information on prices, my Department is consulting to seek views on the possible introduction of mandatory sheep carcass classification and price reporting in Northern Ireland to improve fairness and price transparency in that sector. Carcass classification and price reporting is already mandatory in Northern Ireland for bovine and pig carcasses.

I am pleased to have recently published the 'Future Agricultural Policy Framework Portfolio for Northern Ireland'. It sets out a framework for future policy around four key outcomes developed following engagement with stakeholders. They include productivity, environmental sustainability and improved resilience, as well as an effective, functioning supply chain. I intend to bring forward a public consultation on proposals for future agriculture support measures shortly. I look forward to engaging with all those in the industry as we move forward in developing better and improved support measures for our agri-food sector.

Mr Boylan: I thank the Minister. It is crucial that there is transparency and fairness in the supply chain so that farmers receive a fair price for the food that they produce. Does the Minister agree that ensuring that farmers receive a fair price — one that reflects the cost of producing food in the context of the necessary welfare and environmental standards — needs to be at the core of a future food strategy?

Mr Poots: The best way of achieving the best prices for food is having the best food available. Northern Ireland's food is amongst the best food in the world, and, therefore, its prices should be at the leading edge. We should do everything that we can to ensure that animal health, animal welfare, food traceability, food provenance and the environment, as well as quality, are at the top end in everything that we do, so that, when it comes to commodity food, perhaps, being imported at a lower price, we are able to demonstrate to the buyers and consumers that Northern Ireland food is the best that they can get and, therefore, is worth paying a bit extra for.

Mrs Erskine: The Minister will know that I am fond of the local produce that I eat; I am sure that he is too. Does the Minister feel that Northern Ireland produce is marketed in a way that educates consumers on the benefits of buying local, home-grown food and informs them of our high standards, thus highlighting the need for our farmers to receive a fair price? Given the issues facing the pig sector, for example, what discussions has the Minister had with representatives from that sector?

Mr Poots: We have had a series of discussions with the pig sector, which is going through a pretty difficult period. It was raised with me last week that one processor had made a cut that, many of the farmers felt, was excessive. I have not seen a clear demonstration of the justification for that cut in pig price, other than,

perhaps, a bit of oversupply. Nonetheless, there is considerable demand for the product across the UK and beyond.

If you want to have long-term relationships with suppliers, it is important that you treat those suppliers well. I encourage all processors to do that; to develop those long-term relationships; and to ensure that the suppliers who provide them with the product are in a profitable circumstance. Often, you hear people talk about fair-price farming. They are thinking about Third World countries and so forth, but fair-price farming should apply across the board. Farmers in this part of the world should receive a fair price for their products, because many of them will be in difficult financial circumstances. Many of them are having their income augmented and subsidised through income support measures, and people should reflect on that.

3.00 pm

Mr Allister: I will carry on with the theme of pig farmers. Of course, that is a commercial matter, but does the Minister deprecate the action of the primary processor for many of our pig producers in arbitrarily reducing the price that it was prepared to pay per pig by a colossal £13-50 per pig on the basis that, if it accepted all a farmer's pigs, it would pay only the reduced price? Does that not seem to be an occasion of exploitation of farmers, which is not in the long-term interests of the industry?

Mr Poots: I do not think that it is in the long-term interests of the industry. It is important that producers and processors have that sound working relationship where they may have a degree of competitiveness but where, ultimately, a trust exists. The sooner that that issue is addressed and that cut of £13-50 is reduced, and reduced considerably, the better.

That particular processor imports a lot of pigs from the Republic of Ireland. It is very unfortunate to have a problem dealing with the numbers of pigs that are available in Northern Ireland, which do not run into really large figures when you drill down to it. When meal prices are high, processors need to be cognisant of that and ensure that they are not putting their suppliers in a really difficult financial positions.

Mr McGlone: I will pick up on Mr Allister's point. Along with Mr Irwin, last week at the AERA Committee, I raised the point that it appears to be a form of commercial blackmail. In fact, some of the producers are saying, "We will take 80% of your pigs at full value or all your pigs

with the price knocked down by £13-50". I know that it is a commercial matter and all that, but, Minister, is there any way that you or any public body can intervene in situations like that in order to ensure that people are not being done down in such a manner?

Mr Poots: A number of interventions could be made. One would be an on-farm cull. Personally, I do not think that that would be a particularly positive thing, because the UK is still a net importer of pork products and requires high volumes of pork products. There is a demand there. Therefore, slaughtering and rendering perfectly good food that there is demand for is not really a route that I want to go down. I have also suggested that we could consider reducing the population of pigs right back to birth, but, again, the processors do not like that idea. The issue at this moment is that there are more pigs available than there is slaughter capacity, although we are talking about an amount that is on the margins as opposed to being in the many tens of thousands. The numbers of pigs that are available to the plants and the capacity of the plants to slaughter those pigs could be picked up if there was more Saturday working and things like that happening. I trust that that will be resolved in the not too distant future.

Rural Halls Refurbishment Scheme

3. **Mr Storey** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for an update on the rural halls refurbishment scheme. (AQO 2811/17-22)

Mr Poots: My Department's rural halls refurbishment scheme closed for applications on 11 June 2021, with a total 211 applications received. The first stage in the assessment process was to rank the applications according to their Northern Ireland super output area access-to-services domain, after which officials worked through the eligibility process for each application. When that concluded, 114 applicant organisations were deemed eligible for the scheme, with 97 deemed ineligible.

All ineligible applicants have been informed that their application has been unsuccessful, with the reasons for that decision provided in their correspondence. Those applications that were deemed eligible but not shortlisted due to funding constraints have also been advised of the outcome of their application.

The scheme guidance stated that the number of projects anticipated to be funded would be 30. However, I secured funding to enable 50

eligible applications to be included in the pilot scheme. That will result in training and refurbishment funding of just under £2 million for a total of 50 voluntary and community organisations. An initial 30 organisations have completed their training, and, as of today, 16 letters of offer to the value of £562,000 have been issued, with a further 14 to the value of £474,000 expected to be issued next week. A further 20 organisations will commence their mandatory Managing Your Space training in early December and should receive their letters of offer in March 2022, with an estimated letter of offer value of £665,000. At this juncture, it is anticipated that the first 30 organisations will have the majority of their refurbishment works completed by 31 March 2022, and the additional 20 will be completed by September 2022.

Mr Storey: I thank the Minister for his answer and for the interest that he has taken in this issue in relation to the establishment of the pilot scheme. Clearly, from what he has said, there is a demand in rural areas for such a scheme. Will he outline his plans to progress the scheme in the weeks ahead?

Mr Poots: I thank the Member for his question. It is quite shocking to see how poor some of those facilities are. This funding, which could provide disabled access, a kitchen that can meet normal health and safety standards, new fire safety controls or, perhaps, heating in some of the halls that are still using coal fires, has been demonstrated to be absolutely necessary. A lot of small halls are in rural communities that have been left behind.

We have proceeded with the scheme for 50 halls at this stage. We are looking to see how we can further assist the 114 applications in total that demonstrated that they could and should be funded. We did not have the financial capacity to do that, but we are looking at how that could be done. Given the demand for the programme, we are looking at how it could be mainstreamed in future.

Mrs Barton: A key element of the scheme was the requirement for six members of the community to participate in a mandatory Managing Your Space capacity-building training programme. What evidence do you have that that programme was successful in achieving capacity building?

Mr Poots: We directed the funding towards halls that had never previously received funding. One of the things that we wanted to ensure was that, when the hall operators got

the funding, they would be in a better position to avail themselves of public funding in future. We believe that it is important to provide them with the necessary skills and support, and that is why the training was part of the programme. Our intention was that the funding would not just be a one-off and that, when it comes to other developments that could be carried out for the benefit of that rural community, the operators would be better placed to do that. That is why we carried out the training. At this point, it is probably too early to ascertain the success of the programme, but, nonetheless, we believe that it was very important that it was carried out.

Ms Brogan: I am sure that the Minister will agree that, whether it is down to COVID or Brexit, many of our rural communities are facing huge challenges. Those difficulties need to be addressed within the rural policy framework in order to make any great difference. While the rural halls refurbishment scheme is a good initiative, is the Minister considering any rural business and community investment programmes as part of that framework?

Mr Poots: DAERA has been leading on a number of projects that provide real and significant benefits to rural communities. We have engaged a whole series of schemes through the tackling rural poverty and social isolation (TRPSI) framework. For example, we have pilots on a website development programme, a rural tourism collaborative experiences programme, a rural microbusinesses growth stream, a rural social economy investment scheme, a micro food business investment scheme and a rural community pollinator scheme. There is then a whole series of other established programmes.

Those mentioned are all pilot schemes, but they are innovative. They set out to target rural needs, to drive up the number of visitors to rural communities and to ensure that small rural businesses that are never going to be tapping into Invest NI funding can get those modest grants — £20,000 to £50,000 in the main — that can make a real and substantial difference to the viability of their business.

Mr Blair: With the emphasis now on rural investment, will the Minister provide an update on another rural development initiative from his Department, namely the rural tourism collaborative experiences programme?

Mr Poots: The aim of that programme is to bring together small clusters of rural businesses and other partners to work closely on

developing a range of products and experiences that can be promoted individually or as a combined experience. In those clusters, people are operating in the same field. For example, people producing artisan foods are linked up with the providers of the raw materials and further linked up with markets for their products. Those are the types of things that we wish to encourage.

COVID-19: Rural Areas

4. **Mr Durkan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what assessment he has made of the impact of COVID-19 on rural areas. (AQO 2812/17-22)

Mr Poots: The Executive Office, through the COVID-19 recovery plan, has assessed the needs of all dwellers, urban and rural, as a result of the pandemic. Those needs are reflected in the ongoing roll-out of the COVID-19 recovery action plan. My Department is contributing to a number of actions documented in the plan that are targeted at rural dwellers and businesses, such as the COVID-19 recovery revitalisation scheme and the tourism recovery action plan. In addition, a number of rural stakeholders, when responding to the public consultation on the rural policy framework, expressed concerns about COVID-19 recovery, and those will be addressed through the framework.

At the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I met agriculture industry representatives and stakeholder organisations to assess the impact that it might have on them. After examining the nature and extent of the financial losses that had been incurred, I felt that there was a strong economic rationale for providing financial assistance to agriculture and horticulture businesses. That assistance would be targeted at the farm businesses hardest hit financially and would enable them to deal with short-term market disruptions that would substantially impact on otherwise viable businesses.

My Department secured £41.7 million in 2020-21 from the Executive for a range of COVID-19 support measures, including £25 million for market interventions in the local dairy, beef, sheep, potato, pig, poultry, wool and ornamental horticulture sectors, which was the most comprehensive allocation made by any UK or EU Administration during the coronavirus emergency. In the current year, my Department has secured £21 million, and it is using that to provide support in rural areas affected by the COVID pandemic.

An equality and human rights screening exercise was completed, and the policy was screened. The completed equality impact assessment (EQIA) screening document is available on the DAERA website. A rural needs impact assessment was also completed.

Mr Durkan: I thank the Minister for his answer. COVID-19 has brought with it a plethora of problems, and many of them have been felt more acutely in our rural communities than elsewhere. Will the Minister detail any work that is ongoing between his Department and the Department for Communities on assisting rural communities, which often fall between two stools when it comes to their being able to draw down public funding to run community projects and to tackle isolation and many of the other problems to which the Minister alluded?

Mr Poots: During the COVID outbreak, Carál Ní Chuilín, the former interim Minister for Communities, and I brought together a scheme that supported urban small high street businesses and rural small businesses. The scheme ensured that we were able to give those businesses fairly significant support. Many were able to buy equipment that enabled them perhaps to change how they had been doing things during COVID. That got considerable support.

3.15 pm

We also worked closely with DFI on the scheme to provide rural transportation, and we used that rural transport scheme to provide food and medicines to elderly people who could not get out. As opposed to taking people to the town or village to get their goods, we brought the goods to them. There has been good cross-departmental collaboration to assist people in rural communities.

Mr Speaker: I call Jemma Dolan for a brief question, and the Minister should give a brief response, please.

Ms Dolan: Minister, given the soaring costs of input such as food and fertiliser, do you agree that your party's insistence on ending the areas of natural constraint (ANC) payment was short-sighted and wrong? It has greatly increased the pressure on many farmers, and surely you can now accept that it would have been much better to have retained that payment to provide proper long-term, targeted support for our hill farmers.

Mr Poots: The price of fertiliser is the same for every farmer, not just farmers who live in ANCs. Of course, farmers in ANCs got significant

uplifts in funding through the way in which the single farm payment is now distributed. Consequently, had we kept the ANC payments as well, that would have meant removing payments from a significant number of other farming families who, as demonstrated through the figures that DAERA receives each year, have lower incomes than the farmers whom the Member referred to. A party that speaks a lot about fairness, justice and equality might want to apply that when it comes to this issue.

Mr Speaker: That ends the period for listed questions, Members. We now move on to 15 minutes of topical questions.

Islandmagee Gas Storage Project

T1. **Mr Dickson** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to confirm whether, in respect of the marine construction licence relating to discharge, consent and abstraction for the Islandmagee gas storage project, he was aware of the recommendations of his Department's ornithologists whose response to concerns raised by environmental NGOs about the adequacy of the environmental assets was set out on 3 August 2020. (AQT 1841/17-22)

Mr Poots: I was provided with a considerable amount of information by my officials on the issue, and I was provided with their views on whether, in terms of the environment, it was possible to do that safely. I am clear that I followed the recommendations and advice that were provided to me by my officials.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister. As you have indicated to the House that you were aware that your experts had raised concerns about the adequacy of the assessment, why did you and your Department fail to act on those recommendations by not requiring further information or not refusing the application?

Mr Poots: I can understand that the Member may wish to unpick the process that has taken place, and I have no doubt that others will seek to unpick it in another forum. They are entitled to do that. I followed the advice that was given to me on the issue. If people wish to take that to another forum, that is a matter for individuals or organisations, but I believe that whatever decision we made would have been challenged by one or t'other. We made our decision on the basis of the best information that was available to us at the time.

Climate Change Bill: Rural Impact

T2. **Mr T Buchanan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his assessment of the independent KPMG report on the impact that the private Member's Bill on climate change will have on areas across Northern Ireland and particularly in his constituency of West Tyrone, which is a large rural, farming area. (AQT 1842/17-22)

Mr Poots: The KPMG report was an independent report, and it recognised that the impact would be greater in the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Mid Ulster District Council and Newry, Mourne and Down District Council areas. Those areas account for 43% of Northern Ireland's land farms that are located in less-favoured areas. I have just received a question on ANCs not very long ago. Those are the areas that will be most impacted as a consequence of our actions in dealing with climate change, because they happen to have more peatlands. It is very evident; all the information that we receive is about restoring peatlands and removing them from permanent pasture. That will lead to circumstances where many of the farms in your constituency will be under pressure not to farm actively. That will be a significant debate.

Mr T Buchanan: What advice would the Minister give to farmers in Fermanagh, West Tyrone and other areas of similar land who fear for the future viability of their business?

Mr Poots: I will give advice more to the House. I want the House to take everything into account before it makes decisions, including the fact that it could drive many small family farms out of business. That may be an easy decision for a Member for South Belfast or a city constituency, but Members who represent rural constituencies should be very cautious about ensuring that people who live in their community can no longer engage in a business that has been transferred to them for many generations. The House has the ability to take something from farmers that nobody else can. Nobody else has ever done that.

Dog Theft

T3. **Ms Armstrong** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, in advance of the International Day of People with Disabilities, what engagement he has had with stakeholders such as Guide Dogs Northern Ireland and Assistance Dogs Northern Ireland

about the dreadful and increasing problem of dog theft. (AQT 1843/17-22)

Mr Poots: We want to work closely with the Department of Justice, particularly in providing an animal register, a register of offenders and so forth. There are different kinds of people who keep dogs. The vast majority of people, thankfully, love and adore their dogs. However, there are also those who see dogs as a commodity that they can profiteer from. Everyone who has a responsibility for this — my Department has a significant responsibility — needs to identify how best to make it difficult for such people and do what we can to ensure that they cannot profiteer from animals that the rest of us regard as family members, in most instances.

Ms Armstrong: As you know, Minister, it is the run-up to Christmas, and every year there is the unfortunate instance where people get puppies for Christmas. Will there be a public engagement campaign in the run-up to Christmas or just after to make the public aware of the issue of pet theft and ensure that they know exactly what steps to take should it happen to their family?

Mr Poots: We helped to launch the Paws for Thought campaign last week, which is focused on people acquiring dogs. I was at a shelter where they had nine pups, all of which had had pneumonia. Even after the pups had had substantial treatment, you could still hear that in their chests.

There is so much opportunism with dogs. Dog theft is a big thing. People need to ensure that their dogs are kept in secure areas and that, when they are out and about, they have their dogs under control so that they do not run off, get lost and give someone the opportunity to steal them. There are people who go round the countryside stealing dogs, particularly younger pups, which are very valuable in today's markets. They are easy pickings for thieves, and people need to be aware of that.

Single Farm Payment

T4. **Ms Dolan** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, given the unprecedented challenges that our farmers are facing, partly because of the Brexit that he championed, whether his Department has begun an impact assessment to explore the potential damage from the end of the single farm payment to farmers and farming businesses in each constituency, given that our farmers are facing an uncertain future, with

Brexit, COVID, labour shortages, spiralling costs, climate change and detrimental trade deals all impacting on the viability of farms across the North, leaving farms in her constituency on the brink and surviving only because of the single farm payment. (AQT 1844/17-22)

Mr Poots: If we look at the prices that farmers receive for milk, meat, lamb and cereals, we see that the prices for all of those products are up. Prices in the pig sector are down, and the chicken sector has proven to be stable. Since Brexit, all those prices have gone up. I would have thought that the Member would welcome that.

Ms Dolan: Thank you, Minister, but I am sure that many struggling farmers would not agree with you.

Does the Minister agree that the British Government cannot be trusted with food security as they scramble for trade deals in a race to the bottom, where food and environmental standards are secondary considerations?

Mr Poots: We had a circumstance when horsemeat, which is not traditionally used in the United Kingdom, was moved around all of Europe. The Member may wish to reflect on the food security of some of those whom she would prefer to be with.

Food security will become ever more important for the UK Government. In the past, some people foolishly advised that the UK did not need to have farms. COVID is a clear demonstration of the importance of having a commodity such as food close to home. Energy security is also critical. Look at the circumstances today where energy is being switched on and off as it suits particular Governments. Look at the prices that people pay. Our farms have a significant future ahead of them if we let them and work with them, as opposed to imposing things that will decimate them. I trust that the Member's party will be wise on this and take the right decision, as it fully understands all of the implications of taking the wrong decision, so that we have vibrant farms that can supply food and energy to the people who live in this country and export them.

Planning Consultation: Delays

T5. **Mr McGlone** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs what is being done to speed up the consultation process between the Planning Service and the

NI Environment Agency (NIEA). (AQT 1845/17-22)

Mr Poots: I have held meetings on that and have asked for more staff to be put into that area of work. There is clearly a problem. I trust that not just our Department but other Departments will look at that to ensure that we have a system that is fit for purpose.

Mr McGlone: Thanks for that, Minister. I appreciate the work that you are doing to resolve those issues. I am trying to establish whether there is a particular issue in the natural environment division (NED) in the NIEA and why there is a slowness with its processes. I have one case with the Minister's office.

Mr Poots: There is a particular issue, and I will not run away from it: we do not have enough staff. I have asked for a paper to be submitted to me so that we can get more staff into that area and ensure that decisions can be turned around proportionately. Our staff are under a lot of pressure. As a result, we are not taking calls about what stage applications are at in the process. It was causing considerable delay to deal with those calls, and it is better that staff are focused on getting applications out the door.

On longevity and the amount of time that people wait, I should say that the Department for Infrastructure has some longer waiting times than the NED. Perhaps, the Member could address some of his attention to that, and, together, we can improve the process.

Conacre System

T6. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for his view of the conacre system in Northern Ireland and the potential to review the current tax system to encourage generating renewables and greater land mobility. (AQT 1846/17-22)

3.30 pm

Mr Poots: We have had the conacre system for many years. We have written to George Eustice. We have looked at what is happening in the South of Ireland. We are asking Her Majesty's Treasury to ensure that, if people take land on lease and invest in it by putting up new gates and fencing and by providing lime, which is a key piece of work that will reduce the carbon that that land produces, they get tax relief on that investment. That would be a significant step forward.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his response. Does he accept that other regions of the UK and, indeed, the Republic of Ireland have different systems in place that work well?

Mr Poots: Yes, I do. That is why we have followed it up. We have spoken to various agencies on the issue. We recognise that there is an opportunity to create an efficiency, a benefit for the land and a benefit for the people renting that land, if they can do it in a way that helps them to make long-term investments, as opposed to having the uncertainty of a year-on-year rental that means that they could lose the land and therefore do not invest in it.

Northern Ireland Produce: Promotion

T7. **Mr Dunne** asked the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, after thanking him for accompanying him on a recent visit to McKee's farm shop in Craigantlet and for the support that he has shown for local businesses, whether he agrees that more needs to be done to promote Northern Ireland produce across the UK and, indeed, the world. (AQT 1847/17-22)

Mr Poots: Absolutely. We are working with the Department for the Economy on those issues. There are tremendous opportunities to market Northern Ireland's produce. We have exceptional produce, and that is why much of the food sold by Fortnum and Mason and some of the finest sales companies around the world that sell fine-quality foods can come from Northern Ireland businesses.

Mr Speaker: Time is up. Will Members please take their ease for a moment or two?

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr McGlone] in the Chair)

Committee Business

'Decarbonisation of Road Transport in Northern Ireland': Committee Report

Debate resumed on motion:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Infrastructure on its inquiry into the decarbonisation of road transport in Northern Ireland [NIA 136/17-22]; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure and her Executive colleagues to implement the recommendations contained in the report. — [Mr Buckley (The Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure).]

Ms Hunter: I rise today as a relatively new member of the Infrastructure Committee. I am also our climate champion in the SDLP as well as our infrastructure spokesperson, so it will be no surprise to colleagues to hear that I am pleased that the Committee has been able to focus its time on this important report on decarbonising our transport here. Before I begin, I pay tribute to my colleague Dolores Kelly, my predecessor on the Committee, who put a lot of hard work into the report. I know that she will join me today in offering the support of us in the SDLP for decarbonisation and our intentions to see the report as a partnership between the Committee, the Minister and the wider Executive for delivering change to our society, our people and our environment and its urgent needs.

I thank the Chairman for his detailed contribution on the report, and there are a few aspects of that that I would like to draw out. I am sure it is accepted across the House that tackling the climate crisis is not one Department or Minister's responsibility; the weight of responsibility to deliver this lasting change rests firmly on all our shoulders. That said, we all recognise that transport is a massive emitter, and I know that that is an issue that, since coming into office, our Minister Mallon has worked tirelessly to address. While I will not rehearse all the Minister's actions to date, as, I am sure, she will provide us with more detail, I applaud the Minister's leadership on the issue.

It is frustrating and, frankly, embarrassing that the North is still without legislation to tackle the climate crisis. We truly need to get a move on. We want to see change as quickly as possible in order to reach net zero. We are leading the

way at Westminster and here in government. At Westminster next month, the SDLP leader, Colum Eastwood, will introduce radical legislation to demand the rapid response that we need to protect our planet and our future generations here and to tackle that aspect of generational injustice surrounding climate change. In government here, our SDLP Minister, Minister Mallon, has been leading from the front. At the Conference of the Parties (COP) 26, she announced a task force to deliver more EV charging infrastructure and more investment in zero-emission buses. She has been greening her departmental fleet, has been making planning changes and has been clear that she has worked to ensure that the Executive's energy strategy has a focus on decarbonising transport, including measures to support modal shift, the electrification of transport, the use of alternative fuels in transport and the future of mobility. That all comes on top of the £20 million blue-green infrastructure funding, showing that our Minister is truly putting money where her mouth is. The best thing about the blue-green money is that it empowers local communities to create a shared space. Even in the face of a global pandemic, with the restart of vast operational public services, our Minister has continued to press for change. Notable areas include the establishment of a transport decarbonisation branch tasked with delivering on the ground on modal shift.

I could truly go on all day, and there really is a positive abundance of activity and delivery that the Minister and her Department have been working on. That deserves not only recognition but our support as a Statutory Committee. I welcome what much of the report seeks to achieve, and I can see that aligning with the Minister's priorities and policy direction. However, I want to mention again the energy strategy. While that is not for Minister Mallon — I understand that it sits with the Economy Minister — does Minister Mallon today have any information from the DUP Minister on where the energy strategy is and what it will potentially look like?

I cannot stress it enough that, if we are to deliver the change that our society deserves, we need to work together and to deliver. Any continued dither and delay on the energy strategy is not acceptable. We know what the Economy Minister is proposing, and I accept today that, in relation to the decarbonisation of transport, Minister Mallon wants to see the energy strategy come to the Executive for scrutiny.

Mr Beggs: I rise as the Ulster Unionist infrastructure spokesman to indicate my support for the report from the Committee on decarbonising Northern Ireland's road transport.

There has been much debate about greenhouse gas emission from agriculture, which is estimated to account for 26%, but our emissions come from many areas, including the home, energy supply, other land use and business. The second-largest area of greenhouse gas emissions, however, is transport. It was timely and appropriate for the Committee to investigate that area and to produce the report.

As part of the UK Government's commitment to reaching net zero by 2050 or earlier, they have determined that petrol and diesel cars will not be produced after 2030 and that production of hybrid cars will finish in 2035. Given the rurality of Northern Ireland, the relevance of the private car is that it is essential to many people living in the countryside, enabling them to do their work or to get to their work. Due to our limited public transport, there is a need for a mode of transport that everyone can use when they need it. There is also a need to update our transport strategy to refocus on a range of issues that can reduce our carbon output, such as walking, cycling, greater use of public transport and the decarbonisation of public transport, which has commenced with the introduction of electric and hydrogen-powered buses. We need to ensure, however, that private motorists can also contribute to reducing carbon output when necessary.

I express my appreciation to the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe). It conducted a survey on the use of electric and ultra-low-emission vehicles (ULEVs) on behalf of the Committee. That survey highlighted a huge gulf between climate change rhetoric and what is being delivered in practical terms in our community. Northern Ireland has the lowest proportion of electric charging points in the UK, but, worse than that, those charging points are unreliable. When I look at the figures, I see that Scotland has 32 charging points per 100,000 people, England has 22, Wales has 17 and Northern Ireland has 16.

Rapid chargers are essential to people who may need to top up their power quickly while travelling: Scotland has 7.5 per 100,000 people, England has 3.5, Wales has 1.8 and Northern Ireland has one per 100,000. There is clearly a long way to go; indeed, the lack of charging points and broken charging points are highlighted in the survey. That has transferred into range anxiety for many of those who

already own an electric-charged car and has concerned those who may be considering switching. Comments include:

"The charging infrastructure in Northern Ireland is hopelessly outdated and virtually obsolete. Long distance journeys would be a nightmare."

We must make sure that reliable infrastructure is in place if we are to support our community as it makes the transformation to electric-powered vehicles, and we are clearly not there at present. There is a long way to go.

I was in a village north of Inverness during the summer. It was a small village of, I estimate, 500 people, and there were four charging points in the public car park. I visited a garage, and there were charging points there. I was shocked. Our infrastructure is so far behind. It is vital that not only the Infrastructure Department but other Departments move. I have been posing questions about building regulations in particular. With new developments, why do we not build charging points? Building control regulations have been slow to change, but that is the most efficient way to do this. When you build a new apartment block or a new building, that infrastructure should be put in place. That will be cheaper in the long run and ensure lower carbon inputs when building that infrastructure. It is vital that we move forward together and that all Departments play their part.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member draw his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Beggs: I support the report's recommendations and ask others to do likewise.

Mr Muir: This has been a good-natured and constructive debate — for a change. Hopefully, I can contribute to that. From the perspective of the Alliance Party, the time to tackle the climate emergency is quickly running out. My party and I welcome the report, and, hopefully, the House will agree it.

3.45 pm

One of the quickest and simplest ways in which to enact the report would be through funding Translink's plan for the decarbonisation of its road transport: remember that Translink is road and rail. Its clear plan is to move to net zero by 2040 and then to climate positive by 2050, but the reality, as we debate the motion today, is that we have a funding issue with Translink. There are questions about whether it will be

able to be a going concern as a result of the non-allocation of funds during October monitoring. Although we are having the debate today, we need to be realistic. If we want people to move to decarbonised road transport, we need to fund our main public transport provider in Northern Ireland, which is Translink. I welcome the announcements that have been made to date about the full electrification of the urban fleet in the city of Derry/Londonderry and the further roll-out of hydrogen vehicles, but we must go further and fund Translink properly to deliver services on the ground in the here and now. We must also fund its plan to move to climate positive by 2050.

The report highlights the immediate impact that enhancements of active travel could have on transport. That is important. I welcome the actions that the Minister took last year on a walking and cycling champion, but, realistically, we need to invest an awful lot more in active travel in Northern Ireland. We are right down at the bottom of the investment league table when compared with the rest of the UK and Ireland. We also have to be realistic if we are going to call for investment in active travel. That will require taking difficult decisions about where we are going to put infrastructure in order to ensure that people have safe and sustainable travel routes. There is therefore a real need to look forward. The Alliance Party has been very clear that we need an active travel commissioner to drive forward that change, because substantial change is required.

I have been working with the Electric Vehicle Association Northern Ireland (EVANI), as have many others in the Chamber, for a long time. I genuinely appreciate the work that it has been doing to make electric vehicles more accessible to people in Northern Ireland. It has delivered quite significant achievements, as can be seen from recent announcements. A number of the report's findings and recommendations touch on electric vehicle charging infrastructure. It is important that the recommendations be taken forward, particularly the ones on the used EV market. One of the biggest barriers to people's taking up of electric vehicles is the charging infrastructure. The cost of the vehicles is also an issue. The Committee recently heard evidence about how other jurisdictions have dealt with that. In Norway, for example, the cost of buying an electric vehicle is on a par with that of buying a petrol or diesel car. Intervention from the UK Government on taxation policy would be required so that people could consider that for here. The Alliance Party is clear about our support for electric vehicles and the decarbonisation of transport in our green new deal. Part of that is about providing interest-free

loans for people who want to take up using an electric vehicle. Furthermore, I presented a public petition to the Minister last month about the need for a joined-up strategy to drive improvements in the charging infrastructure. We really need that. The recent announcement by the Electricity Supply Board (ESB) about new chargers, as well as the announcements from EasyGo and other providers, are therefore welcome.

Mr Beggs: Will the Member give way?

Mr Muir: No problem.

Mr Beggs: Does the Member agree that, although it is very welcome that new chargers are being put in place, it is vital also to have maintenance contracts in place to ensure that chargers will be replaced when needed rather than be left defunct and for those who have electric vehicles to have confidence that chargers will work?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Muir: I entirely agree with the Member. The worst thing about having an electric vehicle is not being able to charge it when it needs charged. It is a nightmare. That fear puts a lot of people off even considering an electric vehicle. There are many examples in Northern Ireland of people turning up to the charger and it not working. That needs to be resolved.

The issue about how the market is regulated and the pricing of the market needs to be considered. The ESB network is currently free of charge. We need to move to a system in which there is a charge. Let us be honest: if the charger is free of charge, where is people's disincentive to take their vehicle away after a period? Many people leave it there for hours, during which time other people cannot access the charger. Those issues need to be addressed. That is why a coordinated, joined-up strategy is needed. I agree with the Member about the energy strategy. Where is it? We need to see the strategy for many different reasons, not just for today but because of the cost-of-living crisis.

I very conscious of two issues about electric vehicles. The first concerns how substances are sourced for the production of electric vehicles in an environmentally sustainable way and ensuring that good labour practices are observed. The second is about how we deal with waste from electric vehicles. The industry is not doing very well in that regard — it is

actually doing appallingly — and needs to do much better in how it sources the materials and how it disposes of them.

The last area is hydrogen. We have talked an awful lot about electric, but I had the pleasure of meeting representatives of Hydrogen NI last week. That is something that we need to be looking for, but it has to be green hydrogen: grey hydrogen should not be acceptable. There has to be green hydrogen, and that requires us to improve the infrastructure across Northern Ireland, particularly in regard to public transport and the logistics industry. That will help us power a decarbonised future.

I welcome the report. It is good that we can come together in the Chamber to constructively debate these things.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Will the Member bring his remarks to a close, please?

Mr Muir: I look forward to the Minister's response.

Ms Kimmins: I support the motion, as Sinn Féin's spokesperson on transport. I pay tribute, as others have, to the departmental officials and the research team who put a tremendous amount of work into this important report. The report is very timely as we have just had COP26. It is clear to all that the climate crisis is no longer in the distant future: it is upon us and it must be tackled imminently. Failure to do so will harm our communities and the future generations, and we all have a part to play.

As others have said, our most common methods of transport account for 23% of emissions in the North. Those emissions are linked to a range of medical conditions, and there is no doubt that air pollution is a serious public health issue. It is inevitable that we must transform the way that we travel and work towards cleaner and greener transport, but to do that we need to have the adequate infrastructure in place. One key way of moving towards reducing emissions is to ensure that we have a high-quality public transport system in place and encourage more people to use public transport as part of their daily lives by improving accessibility to it, thereby reducing reliance on the private car.

My constituency has a vast rural area, and one of the main barriers to using public transport for people who live in rural communities is the lack of connectivity to the nearby towns and cities. That results in many having no choice but to rely on their car and, subsequently, contributing

to the challenging situation in which we find ourselves as regards emissions and the climate crisis. There needs to be an overhaul of our bus and rail network by cutting journey times and increasing services. That should include improving the Belfast to Dublin rail service, which is used by many commuters and could be used by more if it was more frequent. Similarly, we must see the urgent reinstatement of the hourly stop in Newry by the Belfast to Dublin bus services, which is an important route for people who travel to and from Dublin Airport. That has been a huge loss, particularly as we approach the Christmas period, when many people will be returning home to Ireland for the first time in two years to be with their families and friends. Those people will have no choice but to travel to and from the airport by car due to the lack of capacity in the current service. If we are serious about decarbonising the road transport system, we need to show greater efficiency and effectiveness in the current service provision and ensure that there are no unnecessary gaps in the public transport system.

Similarly, active travel must play a key role in any forthcoming green transport policy. We are acutely aware of the huge benefits that walking and cycling bring to the health and well-being of society on an individual basis and environmentally. Although many people are keen to engage in more active travel, there are simply too many barriers to prevent them from doing so. Safety for pedestrians and cyclists must be paramount, and we must not just pay lip service to that well-known fact. Just last week, we saw World Day of Remembrance for Road Victims, which acts as a significant reminder of the very high number of people, including many pedestrians and cyclists, who have, sadly, lost their lives on our roads. Although that is not always directly linked to the infrastructure, it is imperative that better and safer infrastructure is in place to reduce the number of people who are seriously injured or killed on our roads and encourage and enable more people to take up active travel.

Across my constituency of Newry and Armagh, there are many keen walking and cycling enthusiasts who are increasingly frustrated by the lack of appropriate active-travel infrastructure to enable them to utilise their preferred mode of transport. We need more footpaths and cycle lanes for proper connectivity to our town centres and key facilities, particularly in rural communities, which are severely lacking in both. I welcome the blue-green infrastructure fund, which has been very successful in helping to address that.

Street lighting is also an important factor. As the Minister will know, one example that I raised recently was in relation to the Bog Road in Forkhill, which is the main connecting route between Peadar Ó'Dornín's GAA club and Forkhill Community Centre. Current policies make that location ineligible for street lighting, despite the high numbers of pedestrians, particularly young people, who are going to and coming from the facilities every day.

It will contradict everything that we are discussing today if we do not take on board the important elements that need to be in place for all ages to take up active travel and to do so confidently. Encouraging uptake of active travel must be from the earliest stage possible, as it will require a cultural shift. That can be demonstrated by the findings of the young persons' behaviour and attitudes survey on travelling to and from school published in 2020. The survey indicated that only 3% of students in the North cycle to their school, despite living less than 3 km from it. That is in stark contrast to the findings of European studies on the same topic that have shown that approximately one-third of students cycle to and from school.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I ask the Member to draw her remarks to a close, please.

Ms Kimmins: It is important that we gain a better insight into why active travel works so well on the continent and transfer that learning to any forthcoming green transport policy and active travel legislation.

Mr Delargy: By all accounts, this report is a robust and cross-cutting piece of work. It cements what we already know about the need for a commitment to sustainable, green travel and about the impact that air pollution can have on health.

I will touch on three key areas of the report. The first is public transport. At the minute, public transport does not meet its purpose, particularly in my constituency of Derry. I have heard a lot of Members talking about rural constituencies; I want to talk about my experience in a more urban constituency. In Derry, there is a lack of bus lanes; buses and trains run at irregular times; and there is a lack of connecting services between the two. The Derry to Belfast line in particular does not meet demand at all. We have seen overcrowding, particularly in the past number of months with COVID. We really need to look at that. To start work in Belfast at 9.30 am, you have to leave Derry at 6.15 am. That is not feasible, and it is certainly not acceptable.

We need to improve the services that we have. We are willing and happy to work with the Minister to put in place, encourage and drive the changes that need to happen. We need to see the desire and commitment to deliver on the A5 and on the decarbonisation of the road network and, particularly, the rail network, because the rail network offers us an opportunity to open up the entire west. As Members well know, you can look at a map of the North and cut it in two: the west is completely neglected for rail. We really need to change that. It is time to open up the west and, in particular, to deliver on the commitment to an all-Ireland rail service by working with the Government in the South. The Wild Atlantic Way, for instance, is a massive tourist attraction, but it is not serviced at all by rail. As a Committee and as an Assembly, we need to take that on board and look at it, because there is a real opportunity to change it.

My second point is on active travel. As a primary-school teacher, I was always very aware of and involved in Walk to School Week. Although it is a fantastic initiative that highlights and emphasises the importance of active travel, it happens only once a year and is perhaps forgotten about during the rest of the year. A number of people talked about education on active travel, and that needs to be a core tenet. We need longer-term solutions, and cycle lanes in particular, across the North. It is fantastic to see them in Belfast and in certain areas of Derry that are more built up, but, as my colleague Liz said, we need to see them across the North so that everybody has access to them. Some €360 million is going towards active travel this year in the South, but there is only £13 million in the North. The comparison is stark. We need a solution for our families and our young people in order to build a framework and, indeed, a mindset for active travel in the future.

My last point — it has been mentioned a lot by other Members, so I will touch on it only briefly — is on electric vehicles. Members have mentioned what is unattractive about them; let us look at what we can do better and how we can work better, particularly with ESB on charging ports. I do not want to rehearse what has already been said about the need to develop and increase the number of ports across the North. ESB definitely has a lot of work to do, and I look forward, as part of the Committee, to meeting ESB and working together on the issue.

I commend the report.

4.00 pm

Dr Aiken: I thank the Committee for its diligence in bringing this valuable report before the Assembly. As my colleague Roy Beggs said, the Ulster Unionist Party welcomes the report. We particularly wish to see decarbonisation of our transport network and, indeed, decarbonisation, full stop. I declare an interest, as I, too, was at COP26. I was particularly interested in what our nation is doing about getting to net zero carbon as quickly as we can, the effort that is being put into decarbonisation and the importance of the move towards EVs. However, there are some fundamental issues that I would like the Minister to address.

We have already alluded to the first issue, which is the situation with the ESB and the electric charging system across Northern Ireland. Frankly, it is an utter disgrace, and the fact that it has reached that point should concern everybody in the Assembly.

Secondly — this is a significant point — I want to send a message to the Finance Minister — I make another declaration of interest as Chair of the Finance Committee — that we are in charge of building regulations. In the rest of our nation, we have already seen a push towards making sure that every building that will be built or modified by 2030 will have to have electric charging points built into its design. As an Assembly, we should ensure that that happens, and I give my commitment as Chair of the Finance Committee that I will push the Finance Minister to make sure that we get to that position, but we need the support of all Executive Ministers. Many of us have seen today the less than stellar performance of unity amongst the Executive, but it is vital that the Economy Minister, the Infrastructure Minister and the Finance Minister work closely together to make sure that we achieve that. It can be achieved, and we should do it.

I welcome the Minister's remarks today about the Union connectivity report. Speaking as probably the only Member of the Assembly who has been at the bottom of Beaufort's Dyke, although not intentionally, I have to say that Boris's bridge or tunnel was a non-starter, but what is important is Union connectivity and making sure that we have proper infrastructure that meets our decarbonisation targets.

There are opportunities here to improve road infrastructure. I would really like to hear what the Minister has to say about the York Street interchange because, yet again, we have heard nothing about what is happening with that. That deals with the connectivity to the ports, which is vital and needs to be looked at.

One Member talked about the importance of green hydrogen. I agree that we cannot have grey or blue hydrogen; we need green hydrogen.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Member for giving way. While the focus of the report is on EV in particular, I share the Member's enthusiasm for the potentially exciting market of green hydrogen in Northern Ireland. Will he agree that there is still a lot of concern among green hydrogen enthusiasts about how slowly our planning system is adapting to that growing market? The Committee visited Wrightbus just two weeks ago. There is huge potential in the market, but it feels that planning and the Department simply do not move quickly enough to meet the needs of that exciting sector.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Dr Aiken: I thank the Member for his remarks. He could have just stopped at "planning". We do not need to talk about green hydrogen because we have real, significant issues with our planning system across Northern Ireland. It is an impediment to getting our economy going again, and it needs to be looked at urgently.

Green hydrogen gives us a great opportunity. We have talked an awful lot about the decarbonisation of our whole network, but one of the most significant things that we could do is use Belfast and Larne ports as centres for hydrogen bunkering for shipping. In the Baltic, we have seen a push towards zero-emission shipping. We should push for the same thing across the Irish Sea. We should use Belfast and Larne as hubs to do that. We should also incentivise the shipping industry to move to the use of hydrogen to do it. While we are at it, Northern Ireland is uniquely placed to be a centre for sustainable aviation fuel not just for the domestic market but for the transatlantic market. That would give us the opportunity to be market leaders and to be leaders as we push towards decarbonisation.

I think that everybody in the Assembly agrees that the most important piece that we need to get to is to have a fit-for-purpose EV charging network across Northern Ireland. However, that needs to be part of a major move towards the decarbonisation of what we have. We have opportunities here. We see what is happening across the rest of our nation. We should grasp those opportunities. Sir Peter Hendy talks in his report about having the ability to tap into funding and resources. We should do that as well. We should not allow financial transactions

capital (FTC) to go back. We should use that £66 million. We should hold the likes of ESB to account to make sure that they deliver what they are supposed to. We have to make difficult decisions. Yes, we will have to go for charging and the rest of it. Anybody who has driven on the motorway network in the rest of our nation and has pulled in and seen 20 or 30 Tesla or other charging points knows that it is doable. It can be done. We have to do it.

Minister, you have the commitment of the Ulster Unionist Party. We will be behind you when you make those changes. All that we need is the courage to go ahead and do it. Rather than talking about it, let us do it.

Mr Blair: I wish to make some remarks as the Alliance Party's environment spokesperson in addition to the comments made already by my colleague Andrew Muir.

The restrictions put in place to limit the spread of COVID-19 have had a widespread impact on people's lives, including changes to their transport behaviours. Global road transport activity was almost 50% below the 2019 average by the end of March 2020, and commercial flight activity almost 75% below that of 2019 by mid-April 2020. Changing patterns of work, shopping and business travel as a result of the pandemic have provided an opportunity and can be a catalyst for a shift towards more sustainable transport behaviours, avoiding a return to pre-crisis behaviours. However, that will require Governments to take decisive actions to limit transport energy use. While the current health crisis is unparalleled in the scale of impacts and government responses, examining past crises can be instructive in informing policy to incentivise sustainable behaviours as we go forward.

The transition to a carbon-neutral transport system brings new opportunities that are highlighted in the report. Creating a sustainable transport industry filled with well-paid, secure green jobs will simultaneously combat the climate emergency and inequality through investment. That investment will create meaningful modal change, support equal opportunities, reduce social exclusion and break down the socio-economic transport divide. Chronic underinvestment in public transport has created a highly car-dependent society in Northern Ireland. Significant infrastructure investment is vital for a clean, sustainable transport system that works for everyone.

Mrs D Kelly: I thank the Member for giving way. Is he, like me, somewhat heartened by the

representation from Members from Sinn Féin on the importance and value of public transport? Would he welcome their intervention with the Finance Minister, Conor Murphy, to urge him to pony up some money to enable some of those aspirations to be met?

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mr Blair: I thank the Member for her intervention, and I would certainly support any investment support for public transport, especially in constituencies such as mine, which contribute heavily to commuter traffic into city areas.

If we are serious about a green recovery, there is no option: Northern Ireland must contribute to UK and international commitments, move to decarbonise our existing transport networks and make significant infrastructure investment enhancements in relation to active travel, greenways and reducing car use. That is vital to the transition to a clean, sustainable transport system that works for everyone. I thank the Committee for its report, which is a significant step forward in driving that collaborative effort.

Mrs D Kelly: I pay tribute, as others have done, to the researchers and, indeed, Committee staff for all their hard work to get us this far. It took a lot of effort, given the change in Committee business to deal with the COVID pandemic and some of the issues that arose from it. I also pay tribute to the former Chairperson of the Committee, Michelle McIlveen, who was determined to see the report tabled. It contains important recommendations, which many Members have referenced, but it also acknowledges the fact that the outworkings and actioning of those recommendations will depend on Executive collaboration. I am an optimist on the day that is in it. I hope that, eventually, the penny will drop amongst all the Executive parties that, if we are all to benefit for the greater good, collaboration, power-sharing and working together are the only way ahead to make all the wonderful recommendations reality.

Mr Muir: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: I will.

Mr Muir: I agree with the Member. Will she agree that seeing the recommendations enacted requires funding and that prevention is better than cure when it comes to health? Funding high-speed rail links between Derry, Belfast, Dublin and Cork and all the other things

will require intervention as part of the three-year Budget settlement that is coming forward.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): The Member has an extra minute.

Mrs D Kelly: I acknowledge the importance of the intervention by Mr Muir. We can all go on about the lighting on roads and street lighting for active travel, but that will not happen unless there is significant investment in infrastructure.

I heard Ms Kimmins refer specifically to a GAA club. I have a GAA club — the Wolfe Tones — that asked for street lighting on the Derrymacash Road and was turned down by Conor Murphy a number of years ago. We have not heard people say, either in the past or in the current Budget round, what their party will demand be delivered. It will require significant investment from the Executive. Dr Aiken referred to the failed Boris bridge, and one hopes that some of the funding that might have been set aside for that will reach these shores for building rail connectivity and assisting in the decarbonisation of our vehicles.

Ms Kimmins: Will the Member give way?

Mrs D Kelly: No. I want to put a couple of things on record, and then I will see about giving way at the end.

On the SDLP's commitment to deal with the climate crisis, no one can fault our aspirations and actions at Westminster, in the Assembly and, indeed, in the work of Nichola Mallon, whether she is in charge of her portfolio or in looking beyond these shores at good practice elsewhere. Only today, she has been working closely with Minister Eamon Ryan on an all-Ireland rail network. Members are right to point out the deficits west of the Bann and how people there have been failed by the short-sighted closure of many of our railway networks. Nichola Mallon is picking up that challenge. Also this week, Colum Eastwood's Climate Change Bill is subject to debate and further progress at Westminster. We have supported other parties here, and, at some point in the new year, I hope to bring my nature restoration Bill to the Floor. It deals with measures to improve air quality, air pollution and the health of the nation and to restore nature and the environment in which we all live and have so valued over the last couple of years in the pandemic.

It is fair to acknowledge that the report can be a driver for change, and it should be seen as key to our partnership with the Minister and the

wider Executive. We welcome the fact that the Minister and her Department will look closely at the recommendations and at what more we can do together. We know that Minister Mallon has put forward options for the decarbonisation of transport through the energy strategy. While that is not a matter for Minister Mallon, we want to know, as others have said, from the Economy Minister and the wider Executive where the energy strategy is. If we are to deliver the change that our society deserves, we need to work together and deliver not just for this generation but for future generations.

4.15 pm

Ms Bailey: Like others, I thank the Committee for producing the report. This is a great discussion and is exactly what we should do as an Assembly, but I do not want to go over the many points and issues that have been raised. The report is pretty damning about the state of our infrastructure system. That should be absolutely no shock to anybody who has been paying attention.

Transport is the second-highest sector for emissions. At exactly the same time as car usage should be decreasing, transport emissions are increasing and car dependency is rising. That is not just about the current Minister for Infrastructure — Minister, I feel your pain — but it is the failure of successive Ministers, Executives and Governments who have failed to prioritise and fund the necessary investment in our transport system. The Audit Office tells us that DFI needs £1.2 billion just to bring the road network up to standard: not to transform, improve or reach net zero but to stand still. That is the extent of the neglect with which we are dealing.

I caution anyone reading the report that EVs are absolutely no panacea. There is little acknowledgement in the report of the emissions from car production, and, while those emissions may not be recorded here, that does not give us the green light to ignore them.

The report acknowledges the immediate impacts that could be achieved if we focused on short-term, targeted investment in our existing network, and yet we have no active travel infrastructure worth talking about. One per cent of journeys here are by bicycle compared with 70% by car. The majority of journeys in Belfast city are less than 2 miles, but we have little over 2 miles of protected cycle lanes in the city as a whole. Is it any wonder that most people are not engaged? We need to spend a wee bit more than £2 a head on active travel. We need to stop building roads and to start building cycle

lanes. We need to give priority to buses on all routes and urgently expand public transport networks to ensure that they are properly integrated with active transport and connect people with place. We must, of course, make that affordable, which our current public transport costs are not.

I hope that the report will signal a change in how we operate, but you will have to excuse me if I am cynical. I do not think that it will. We have seen a lack of ambition in the past year alone. While other places have grabbed the opportunity that COVID presented to transform the use of public space, we have managed a couple of pop-up cycle lanes and given about half a dozen car parking spaces for a parklet. A Department lodged an objection to a planning application to extend pavements outside its offices to improve public spaces for people. The Department objected because it did not want to lose the parking spaces at its front door: I kid you not. I am scundered for us.

I put it to all those who have said the right things in the Chamber today: do more. If we take anything from COP26, let it be that words count for nothing if we do not take action. That goes beyond DFI; it goes to the heart of every Department and what they do to ensure that we transition to a sustainable, inclusive society today. I call on them all to start taking green action and to stop talking and greenwashing. We have really waited long enough.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Anois, glaoim ar an Aire Bonneagair le freagra a thabhairt ar an díospóireact. A Aire, tá suas le 15 bomaite agat. I now call the Minister for Infrastructure to respond to the debate. Minister, you have up to 15 minutes.

Ms Mallon (The Minister for Infrastructure): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker. I thank the Committee for Infrastructure for undertaking this important inquiry. I thank the Chairperson and the Committee members who have spoken in this important debate on the decarbonisation of road transport. The debate is timely, following COP26.

As Minister for Infrastructure, I am focused on doing what I can to tackle the climate crisis, including addressing emissions from road transport. I have listened carefully to Members' views. As several Members outlined during the debate, road transport is a key contributor to emissions and energy use. As the inquiry report rightly identifies, if we are to reach net zero targets, simply switching to electric vehicles will not be enough; it will also require reducing the number of vehicles on roads and promoting

alternative modes of transport such as walking, wheeling, cycling and public transport.

Mr Boylan talked about his concerns that the report will become another strategy that is left to sit on a shelf to gather dust. I assure Members that my Department has been taking action on a number of fronts and in line with the recommendations in the report.

The first recommendation is that the Department update its strategies, policies and investment plans with a clear net zero focus. In June of this year, I published 'Planning for the Future of Transport: Time for Change', which clearly sets out my views on how we in Northern Ireland should follow a sustainable, hierarchical approach to achieving a better transport network. I assure the Committee and other Members that I am committed to developing policies and plans that will deliver a long-term plan for cleaner, greener transport in Northern Ireland. My commitments will be set out in the forthcoming Executive energy strategy, to which my Department has been contributing as transport lead and which will support the Executive's green growth agenda. While my Department is not responsible for bringing it to the Executive and then forward for publication, it is my sincere hope that the energy strategy will be published before the end of this year, as it is a critical part of how we tackle the climate emergency and address the energy crisis.

I move now to the report's second recommendation. Earlier this year, I established a dedicated transport decarbonisation branch with new personnel in the Department's transport policy directorate to take forward this work. I have made the promotion of sustainable transport a priority. Members will know that I have identified that, out of the allocation of £20 million for the blue-green fund, £13.5 million will be spent this year on active travel projects across the North and on providing support to councils for greenways and other cycling measures. I also published the Belfast cycling network plan earlier this year, and I have promoted walking, wheeling and cycling as the first choices in modes of travel to benefit the environment and people's physical and mental health.

The inquiry report also rightly recognises that there is a need to prioritise low-emission, comfortable, coherent public transport in order to encourage its use. That is particularly the case as we continue to build back from the effects of the COVID pandemic. In December 2020, we introduced the first hydrogen-powered double-decker buses into public service. Three

new hydrogen fuel cell buses were introduced as part of a zero-emission bus pilot project powered by green — that is important — renewably produced hydrogen. I have also provided funding of around £74 million for the purchase of 145 zero- and low-emission buses that have entered and will continue to enter the Translink fleet during this year and next. Of those, 80 will be electric-powered buses, while 20 will be hydrogen-fuelled. Plans are in place to have all bus services in Northern Ireland operated by zero-emission vehicles by 2040.

I want to respond to the points that Mr Muir, in particular, raised around funding. It will require substantial investment if we are to do this and get it right. In October monitoring, not a penny was allocated to Translink, and the indications are that that may also be the case in January monitoring. That presents a challenge for me as the Minister for Infrastructure, to the Committee and to the House, because it will then be about trying to ensure the survival of our existing public transport network, which, as Members have rightly identified, should be significantly increased and enhanced. I sincerely hope that we do not find ourselves in that position in January monitoring, because we need sufficient resource funding to maintain and protect the current network.

We should absolutely be ambitious in expanding network provision, particularly for our rural communities, and in ensuring that we deliver a zero-emission fleet. In line with that commitment, Members will be aware that I recently announced £30 million of additional investment to replace the Foyle Metro fleet with zero-emission battery electric buses. I am proud to say that that will make Derry one of the first cities across these islands to have a zero-emission urban bus fleet. In addition, earlier this year, I announced the launch of the all-island strategic rail review to consider how the rail network on the island of Ireland can improve sustainable connectivity across the island and improve the environment. Today, I am delighted to launch the public consultation element of the all-island strategic rail review, which will give citizens, businesses and communities the opportunity to have their say on their ambitions for rail across the island.

My Department continues to promote car sharing and the use of public transport through the ongoing expansion of park-and-ride and park-and-share sites and to explore integration with active travel options. Reducing our journeys and maximising our modal shift to walking, wheeling, cycling and sustainable transport is the first step to reducing emissions from transport. However, not all journeys can

be done in that way, as Members have rightly pointed out. On behalf of the Executive, I was pleased to endorse the Glasgow declaration on zero-emission cars and vans announced at COP26 to accelerate the transition to 100% zero-emission cars and vans.

I turn to recommendations 3, 4, 5 and 6 of the report. Members will know that, to drive things forward, I recently announced the establishment of an EV infrastructure task force. That group will help us to deliver a modern, reliable, public electric vehicle charging infrastructure to provide confidence to users of ultra-low-emission vehicles. It will comprise public- and private-sector organisations working together over the next year, and it will, as the report has rightly acknowledged, include representation from EV owners and energy and local government sectors to consider the actions that are required to address some of the barriers identified in the inquiry report.

Mr Buckley: I thank the Minister for giving way. I welcome the task force, because I think that all Members, both in the report and their contributions, noted the dire state of the charging infrastructure. We all need to get behind that in order to advance it.

The Minister mentioned hydrogen, and, obviously, it is a key commitment for her, and it is an exciting development. Will the Minister consider, perhaps, a hydrogen task force to look at the issues pertaining to that industry, particularly in its fledgling years, to ensure that we have the infrastructure in place to meet the need?

Ms Mallon: When it comes to the green growth strategy, on which DAERA leads, a group of Ministers convened to discuss a range of issues previously. One of those issues was hydrogen. My understanding is that we are due to reconvene. I have no doubt that hydrogen will be discussed, given its importance to the environment but also the economy.

I will continue to engage with Executive colleagues and the British Government in respect of funding to support the development of the EV infrastructure network. Recently, ESB has been successful in securing £3.27 million from the Levelling Up Fund to expand and enhance the network across Northern Ireland. I am keen for councils to access the £20 million of on-street residential charging funding that is available. As Members will know, to incentivise councils to apply, I have set aside £350,000 of match funding. My officials will work with the councils, so that 100% of their capital costs will

be covered when they make a successful application.

I am supportive of the move by organisations to green their fleets, particularly in the public sector, because there is a responsibility to lead by example, but I recognise the current challenges with vehicles that are harder to decarbonise, including HGVs. Members will also know that I have encouraged Executive colleagues to lead by example by switching to electric ministerial vehicles. I made that choice when I took up my post. If the Executive were to do that, it would send a strong and positive message about our commitment to helping others to make the switch. In addition, my Department has purchased electric vehicles as part of a pilot project. That will allow us to assess the suitability of electric vehicles to meet operational needs, with a view to replacing other vehicles in our fleet with low-emission vehicles in the future.

The Department is also working to reduce diesel emissions from the Strangford ferry service entering the environment, and I have provided £1.36 million from the blue-green fund to assist community transport organisations to assess the feasibility of using electric vehicles for the services that they provide to communities across Northern Ireland. That is in addition to providing financial support to enable the people of Rathlin to have access to e-bikes and a greener community car, because I want to do what I can to support the people of Rathlin in realising their ambition to be carbon-neutral.

Where possible, my Department will continue to facilitate demonstration projects of alternatively fuelled vehicles in Northern Ireland, and we will continue to liaise with other jurisdictions, including through the British-Irish Council transport working group, to learn from their pilot projects and trials, because that shared learning is very important.

4.30 pm

The decarbonisation of road transport will mean behavioural change that will have an impact on everyone. I welcome the Committee's support in bringing those changes forward. I assure the Committee that I will consider the inquiry report and its recommendations carefully and that I am genuinely committed to working with the Committee and Members throughout the House, and with communities, in order to ensure that we make the positive progress that is required if we are to tackle the climate emergency.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I call the Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure, David Hilditch, who will have up to 10 minutes to conclude and make a winding-up speech on the motion.

Mr Hilditch (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Infrastructure): I thank all Members, Committee members and those outside it, who have contributed this afternoon; it is much appreciated. I also thank the Minister for her attendance and her contribution. In particular, the Committee staff and the Assembly's researchers all deserve a big thank-you for carrying out the donkey work and the spadework behind the report.

Many contributors to the debate have talked about the urgency for action on the issue, and they are correct; this is an urgent matter. Although the deadline for the banning of petrol and diesel vehicles is 2030, it will be upon us much quicker than we think. The development of our infrastructure takes time, and we must act now in order to be ready. The report and its recommendations are a call on government to take the issue seriously and to begin to plan.

The Committee for Infrastructure's report outlines the challenges and obstacles that are ahead for us, but it also highlights examples of what can be done through a willingness to plan and invest. As part of its inquiry, the Committee carried out a survey of the public, and we spoke in particular to the owners of electric vehicles. From that work, it was made very clear to the Committee that our charging infrastructure is not fit for purpose and needs urgent action. I am aware that, over the last number of days, ESB has received money from the Levelling Up Fund in order to enhance its charging network. That is something that we have called for in the report, and I am delighted to welcome that move. However, more needs to be done at government level, and we need policies for the planning and integration of home charging points. We need financial assistance for individuals who purchase electric vehicles, and we need a willingness from government to move to electric fleets themselves in order to show that they take these issues very seriously.

The recommendations from the Committee for Infrastructure's inquiry are based on a central point, which is to meet the challenges of the 2030 and 2035 deadlines. That will require a unified effort. We will need a strategy across Departments and councils as well as businesses and local communities. In its report and recommendations, the Committee calls for a plan. I believe that those who are considering investing in electric vehicles would take comfort

from seeing a plan coming out of government that showed the direction of travel and a strong commitment to what they will put in place and for when. That in itself will stimulate an uptake in electric vehicles. The public will take confidence from seeing government adopting those new technologies and will see that it is not just a flash in the pan.

The Department for Infrastructure will need to know where it wants to end up on the issue and to have that embedded in all of its work. It is also important that the development of the electric vehicle charging infrastructure is supplemented with an increasing push to develop public transport by rail and bus, with and the development of opportunities for active travel. Where we get to in 2030 could be completely different from what we have now. Done badly, we could have electric cars, public transport and active travel all in competition with one another for support from the Government and the public, with none of them doing anything really well. I can see that the work is ongoing on the issue, and I was delighted to hear the Minister's commitments this afternoon. I support that action, but, as is so often said in the House, it needs to be joined up, with a well-planned end point for what we are trying to achieve.

I will now make some comments of my own as a member of the Democratic Unionist Party. The shift in public transport away from diesel towards alternative energies has been a party commitment of ours for many years. That is a core component of the energy strategy, which, hopefully, will be delivered by our Economy Minister, Gordon Lyons. It is unacceptable that, compared with the recommendation of the independent Climate Change Committee, Northern Ireland has only a third of the total number of rapid charging points and top-up chargers for electric vehicles. Even where those are in place, there are concerns about a postcode lottery. There is quite clearly a disjointed approach to the infrastructure, particularly in my home town of Carrickfergus, where charging points can be counted on the fingers of one hand. Indeed, from research, I believe that there is only one, at the railway station. Ultimately, if commuters and businesses are to have the confidence to take a leap of faith, they need to be able to benefit from a fully resourced, joined-up and well-maintained charging infrastructure right across our Province.

It is essential that electric charging points be required as part of planning for new homes — a number of Members mentioned that — and office developments. With better and earlier

interventions, there is an opportunity to drive forward the uptake of electric-powered vehicles, and ingrain that within community development plans. It most certainly requires the Executive to focus on policies that reduce the financial and non-financial barriers to electric car uptake, that do not let sections of society slip through the cracks and that ensure cooperation between various Departments and agencies to see maximum benefit throughout the community.

Northern Ireland is uniquely placed to use renewable electricity to produce green hydrogen. This would make use of the wind that is available when demand for electricity is lower. We want to see our Province become a world leader in the development of electrolysis, hydrogen fuel and hydrogen-fuelled vehicles for which there will be a rapidly growing demand worldwide.

Mr Robinson: Will the Member give way?

Mr Hilditch: Yes.

Mr Robinson: Will my colleague agree that Wrightbus in Ballymena, which the Committee had the pleasure of visiting recently, is leading the way in manufacturing hydrogen buses?

Mr Hilditch: Thanks for that, George. Unfortunately, I was not able to get to that due to other commitments but, having spoken to the Chairman, I know that it was a positive visit.

The new Hydrogen Training Academy, to be based at Silverwood Business Park in Ballymena, is to receive £511,000 from the UK Government's Community Renewal Fund (CRF). With hydrogen emerging as a leading sustainable energy solution, this first-of-its-kind project for Northern Ireland will enable and develop a dynamic, skilled workforce that can take advantage of hydrogen and clean tech opportunities. The academy is one of 31 projects across Northern Ireland set to benefit from a total of £12 million in CRF funding, all focusing on skills, education, local business and employment.

Skills strategies will be important if we are to exploit emerging green technologies with the transport sector and the public sector more generally. Training and upskilling young people must be at the heart of this. My constituency of East Antrim has long been a powerhouse in supplying electricity to the Northern Ireland economy. The power stations at Kilroot and Ballylumford on the coast have long supplied the majority of Northern Ireland's electricity needs. EP UK Investments Ltd took over the

plants in late 2019, and is transitioning to a new, cleaner source of generation involving the integration of renewables. The Kilroot plant, near Carrickfergus, is the location for a planned green energy park with investment of some £600 million, incorporating a range of technologies and applications.

As Deputy Chair of the Committee, I fully welcome the Committee report. It is one of the many steps that the Assembly must take to create a more sustainable, cleaner and environmentally friendly future for all. I commend the report to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That this Assembly approves the report of the Committee for Infrastructure on its inquiry into the decarbonisation of road transport in Northern Ireland [NIA 136/17-22]; and calls on the Minister for Infrastructure and her Executive colleagues to implement the recommendations contained in the report.

Assembly Business

Standing Order 10(3A): Extension of Sitting

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): I have received notification from the Business Committee of a motion to extend the sitting past 7:00 pm under Standing Order 10(3A).

Resolved:

That, in accordance with Standing Order 10(3A), the sitting on Monday 29 November 2021 be extended to no later than 8:00 pm. — [Mr Muir.]

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr McGlone): Just take your ease while we move to the next item of business, please.

(Mr Principal Deputy Speaker [Mr Stalford] in the Chair)

Private Members' Business

Onshore Fracking (Prohibition) Bill: First Stage

Ms A Murphy: I beg to introduce the Onshore Fracking (Prohibition) Bill [NIA 48/17-22], which is a Bill to prohibit onshore hydraulic fracturing.

Bill passed First Stage and ordered to be printed.

Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill: Second Stage

Miss Woods: I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill [NIA 41/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: In accordance with convention, the Business Committee has not allocated an overall time limit to the debate but has agreed a limit on individual contributions. The sponsor of the Bill shall have 15 minutes to move the motion and 10 minutes to make a winding-up speech. The Minister will have up to 15 minutes to contribute, and the Committee Chair and all other Members who speak will be allocated 10 minutes.

Miss Woods: I begin by paying tribute and speaking directly to victims and survivors of domestic abuse. The Bill has been developed with your interests and experiences at its core. The Bill is for you, and it will also help your employer. By helping you, they will be helping themselves and addressing the significant costs that arise as a result of domestic abuse. At the outset, it is important to say that, if you are suffering from abuse, please reach out to someone and please get some support.

The Bill is about saving lives. It provides victims and survivors with a pathway to safety. It protects them in the workplace from the effects of abuse by providing at least 10 days' paid safe leave. Safe leave can be used to deal with emergency situations. It can allow victims and survivors to get medical care and mental health care. It can be used for moving house, attending legal appointments, going to court, resettling children or other family members, seeking advice and help from support services, sorting out finances and organising the logistics

and transition from an abusive relationship to a place of safety.

We have an epidemic of domestic abuse in Northern Ireland, and the pandemic and the restrictions imposed have exacerbated the scale of the crisis that we face. The PSNI recorded over 31,000 incidents of domestic abuse in the last year, and that is just the tip of the iceberg, as we know that much of it goes unreported. The number of domestic abuse crimes recorded — over 19,000 — is the highest since records began and nearly twice the level recorded in 2005, representing one in five of all crimes recorded in the last year. PSNI figures for my constituency show that the number of domestic abuse-related crimes recorded in Ards and north Down jumped from 546 in 2020 to 692 in 2021, which is an increase of 146.

Domestic abuse is not confined to the home. It is a workplace issue, and a growing body of research demonstrates the impact that abuse has on workers and businesses. Common themes are mental health problems; declines in productivity and performance; on-the-job harassment or being assaulted before work or prevented from going to work; disruption and a reduction in time spent in the workplace; employment instability; and job loss and unemployment.

In 2017, a survey of 450 people, commissioned by Women's Refuge in New Zealand found that, out of 60% of victims and survivors who were in full-time employment before they entered an abusive relationship, more than half lost their jobs during that relationship.

4.45 pm

Moving to research that has been done here, a 2014 survey conducted by the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU) that included responses from over 1,700 people in Northern Ireland found that more than 80% of those respondents who had experienced domestic violence reported that it had affected their work performance due to their being distracted, tired or unwell. Roughly a third said that they were late for work. Nearly half said that they were forced to take time off.

That report also highlighted what can happen in the most extreme circumstances. It mentioned the high-profile cases of Clare Bernal and Hollie Gazzard, who were both murdered by their abuser at their place of work. In Northern Ireland, since March 2020, 10 women have

been killed, or are suspected of having been killed, by a man known to them.

The current legal framework of support for victims of domestic abuse in the workplace is not sufficient from the perspective of victims and employers. For victims, the threat of losing their job or income are significant barriers that are faced when help and support are sought. Many may not have holidays to take at short notice or have any holidays left. Others are forced to take unpaid leave, go on statutory sick pay or leave employment altogether. Others may work shifts, which they may not be able to get covered or swapped, or become subject to disciplinary procedures when they desperately need time off. From the perspective of employers, difficulties arise through lost output, additional costs and the requirement of extra resources. Estimates from 2009 suggest that domestic violence costs the economy here £180 million per year. However, the most recent research by the Home Office appears to show that that cost could be £400 million per year.

That is the context in which I introduced the Bill, which will coincide with and complement the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021. The Bill has the power to save lives, and we should consider that potential in the context of everything that we discuss on it.

From December 2020 to January 2021, I ran a public consultation for eight weeks and received 450 responses. The vast majority of those, 440, were responses to an online survey. Key findings include that 96% of those who replied believe that paid leave for victims and survivors of domestic abuse should be enshrined in law; 90% agreed that those victims and survivors face barriers to accessing support services because of work; 98% said that they are concerned about how seeking help and attempting to change their circumstances would affect their financial situation; 94% agreed that paid leave for victims and survivors of domestic abuse would enable them to seek help and would help them access healthcare services, treatment and therapy to deal with the long-term effects of that abuse; and 95% said that it would improve their ability to access emergency and specialist support services.

A large number of respondents used the space to reflect, in comments and from personal experience, on how financial support is a huge factor for those who feel that they cannot leave an abusive relationship. Others explained that many of the things involved in changing circumstances and leaving the abusive relationship are highly demanding and require

time during normal working hours. Those are issues like childcare, court and legal appointments, which add to the mental and financial strain of the situation when victims and survivors are already trying to hold down a job.

One respondent noted how the lack of support in work led to attempted suicide, and many who identified as victims and survivors of domestic abuse explained that they had to leave their jobs or were unable to access help because of work. The Bill will address the current inequality between those who have access to support and those who do not.

I will turn to the specifics of the Bill. Clause 1 inserts a new Chapter 4 into Part III of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996, entitled, "Domestic Abuse Safe Leave", which requires the Department for the Economy to:

"make regulations entitling an employee who is a victim of domestic abuse"

to paid leave. The term "safe leave" is a growing international concept to describe paid time off work that is used to deal with issues related domestic abuse, which is why it is used here.

Proposed new article 112EA(2) of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 explains:

"An employee is a victim of domestic abuse if they are being subjected, or have been subjected, to behaviour of a kind described in section 1 of the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021."

Section 1(2)(a) of that Act describes abusive behaviour as that which:

"a reasonable person would consider ... to be likely to cause [the victim] to suffer physical or psychological harm".

The person engaging in abusive behaviour must be "personally connected" to the victim.

Proposed new article 112EA(3) of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 makes it clear that the reference in the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 to "a course of behaviour" can be "disregarded" for the purposes of safe leave. That is important because safe leave is partly a protective measure and should be responsive to a single incident. For example, if a victim suffered a very

serious injury or was subjected to extreme mental or emotional abuse on one occasion, they would still have the right to safe leave. The victim may be looking for help due to the harm that they suffered, and they may be thinking, "I need to get out of here. My life is at risk".

Proposed new article 112EA(5) of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 gives a non-exhaustive list of the things that safe leave might be used for, including "finding alternative accommodation", seeking healthcare or social security support, "protecting family members" or getting "legal advice".

Proposed new article 112EA(6) of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 would ensure that employees would be entitled to a minimum of 10 days' leave each year. Should an employer wish to exercise their discretion and offer a greater allowance or flexibility when an employee uses 10 days and needs more, there is nothing to stop them from doing so. The regulations to be tabled by the Department may make supplementary provisions, including enabling employers to attach conditions to the entitlement of safe leave. For example, an employee may be required to give notice where it is practicable and possible to do so.

Proposed new article 112EE of the Employment Rights (Northern Ireland) Order 1996 would give the Department considerable scope to develop regulations on "notices", "records" and "procedural requirements", including on the consequences of failing to comply with such requirements. However, there is no requirement in the Bill for workers or employees to provide proof that they are victims. That is crucial because doing so would present a substantial barrier to accessing safe leave. Through the public consultation process, we heard that from victims and survivors loudly and clearly. I quote from one respondent who said:

"a burden of evidence for victims seeking leave could cause stress and shame".

Another respondent provided an example of how mental health issues arising from domestic abuse caused "enormous stress and upset" when they had to disclose treatment and request a "fit for work" letter from their doctor in order to start a new job later in life. That respondent explained:

"having to provide this felt like I was paying again for something that someone else had done".

Another respondent explained:

"I think asking for proof or evidence will negate the whole scheme due to the shame and stigma".

As a society, we must address and dispel the culture of disbelief around abuse. Disclosure is immensely difficult, and requesting this kind of leave is an incredibly hard thing to do for someone who is suffering in horrible circumstances. Imagine that person is you: filling in the leave request form and then being asked to prove it. We do not need to put in place any other hurdles or hoops to jump through in order to access safe leave. The process should be as simple and quick as possible, just as it is for other forms of leave.

Safe leave is to be a day one right. In other words, it will not require a probationary period before entitlement is granted. That is essential to reflect the fact that victims and survivors do not decide when and how the abuse happens. They may require support at any time. Indeed, it might be a matter of life and death.

The Bill is deliberately drafted to be simple and clear and to give the Department an appropriate degree of flexibility to develop the regulations. That is important to ensure that we can introduce this kind of leave as soon as possible. The regulations will require the approval of the Assembly, and there will be a very important role for Members to scrutinise them when they are tabled. The Bill also requires the Department to provide guidance about safe leave and to report on and monitor the effectiveness of the regulations.

It is long past time that we in Northern Ireland caught up with international best practice and standards for dealing with domestic abuse and its impact on workers and businesses. Safe leave is a statutory employment right in the Philippines, New Zealand, Italy, parts of Canada and the US, and over a million workers in Australia have access to it. Some councils in Scotland and Wales and companies in the private sector, such as Vodafone and Danske Bank, have introduced it in the UK. The Irish Government are due to publish their proposals to legislate for that kind of leave very soon.

I recognise that it will be an employer's responsibility to provide safe leave and that costs will be involved. However, we should not detach the costs from the benefits. We need to recognise the interrelationship between the social cost to victims and the financial burden on employers, not to mention the cost to the state. In my view, which is based on the

evidence and research in that area, as well as on the experience overseas, any associated costs would be offset by the benefits. We know that victims and survivors are desperately trying to manage their circumstances without support through absence, statutory sick pay, unpaid leave and so on. We also know that the lack of support — the status quo — is costing businesses a huge amount in lost output and reduced productivity.

In 2016, research by the Australia Institute's Centre for Future Work suggested that only about 1.5% of female employees and around 0.3% of male employees were likely to utilise paid domestic leave provisions in any given year. It also noted that the costs to employers associated with those payouts were likely to be largely or completely offset by the benefits to employers from the provision of paid domestic violence leave. Over one million workers in Australia already have access to safe leave through their employer. The private sector there has led the way, which demonstrates the clear benefits to business and the economy, and there are now moves to put it on a statutory footing. The minor recurring costs to the Department will be from reporting on the operation of the law and monitoring the effects of the regulations, including on issues of compliance.

I urge all Members to support the Bill's passage at Second Stage. I thank everyone who has played a part in getting the Bill to this point. To my family, to my team, in particular my researcher, to my party colleagues and to everybody who has listened to me talk at length about the Bill for the past 18 months, I say thank you for your support. I also thank the Assembly staff, the Bill team, the legislative drafter, the trade unions; and all the organisations — Women's Aid, the Men's Advisory Project (MAP), Victim Support and the women's sector — to which we owe a huge debt of gratitude for the work that they do. Finally, I thank the Committee for the Economy for allowing me to present to it last week. I am grateful to the Minister for the Economy, the Minister of Finance and all the departmental officials who spared time to meet me to discuss the Bill.

We have a unique opportunity, as the days remaining in this mandate begin to dwindle, to pass legislation that will save lives and help and support victims and survivors who suffer daily from the effects of abuse and that has the potential to transform people's lives for the better. Let us grasp the opportunity to send a strong, unified message from the House that we will not tolerate abuse and that we will help you.

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: I call Ms Jemma Dolan.

Ms Dolan: Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. Sorry. Should it not be the Chair of the Committee?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You are absolutely right. I am sorry. I do beg your pardon. I call Dr Archibald.

Dr Archibald (The Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy): Go raibh maith agat, a Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle. How long do I have?

Mr Principal Deputy Speaker: You have 10 minutes.

Dr Archibald: Go raibh maith agat.

First, as Committee Chair, I will outline the Committee's consideration of the Bill to date, after which I will speak in my party capacity. As the Bill sponsor, Ms Woods, outlined, the Bill will entitle workers or employees who are victims or survivors of domestic abuse to at least 10 days' paid leave in each leave year. Ms Woods set out the Bill in detail, so I will not repeat any of that. The Committee received a pre-introductory briefing from the sponsor at its meeting on 24 November, in which she outlined the detailed policy proposals in the Bill. I thank the Member for her early engagement on the Bill and for the briefing on its principles.

The Committee is aware that domestic abuse victims face a range of concerns when needing to access help and support. The legislation is long overdue, given that, up until now, there has been no statutory entitlement to paid safe leave for people in those extremely difficult circumstances. Workers should be given adequate time to receive the help and support required and should be supported by their employer. It is hoped that most employers would be compassionate and understanding towards people in such circumstances. Some public- and private-sector employers have already successfully introduced safe leave policies.

As part of the discussions on the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, the Committee previously sent a letter to the then Minister for the Economy on 16 November 2020 regarding its support for paid special leave for those who suffer domestic abuse. The issue was raised as a recommendation in the Justice Committee report on that Bill, and the then Economy Minister also supported the provision

of safe leave. So far, however, no progress has been made by the Department in bringing anything forward. The Committee shares the Bill sponsor's desire to see that support put in place. Members understand that much of the detail will be specified in regulations that will be brought forward by the Economy Minister and subject to Committee and Assembly scrutiny.

The Committee welcomes the Second Stage of the Bill and looks forward to engaging at all levels, through its consultation, with those impacted on by the legislation, including organisations that work with domestic abuse victims and survivors, and with employers in order to ensure that it is fit for purpose and that workers are adequately supported when they need it most.

5.00 pm

I will make some comments as Sinn Féin economy spokesperson. I am conscious that I am speaking on this important issue in the context that we in the North have the joint highest rate in Europe of women killed as a result of domestic violence. That is a stark statistic. Make no mistake: domestic abuse is a workplace issue, and it needs to be treated as such. The emotional and psychological cost of domestic and gender-based violence is absolutely devastating, but there are also significant economic costs associated with this crime, including a person's ability to attend and perform at work.

A study by the National University of Ireland Galway and Safe Ireland put the average individual cost of domestic abuse at over €115,000. In 2017, the European Institute for Gender Equality estimated that intimate partner violence against women cost EU member states €109 billion a year. The three main types of cost identified were lost economic output; provision of services, including health, legal, social and specialised; and the personal, physical and emotional impact on the victim. In fact, as outlined by a Council of Europe report into violence against women, employers and the business sector have to bear substantial losses caused by the psychological and ill-health consequences of violence against women, such as unpredictable absenteeism from work, reduced productivity, poor concentration and accidents.

As the Bill's sponsor outlined, any costs will be offset by the benefits. Paid leave for victims of domestic abuse is already in place and is successfully working in a number of other countries, in local authorities in Britain and in private companies here. The Civil Service here

in the North also operates a special paid leave policy for domestic reasons, which can include domestic abuse. Facilitating domestic abuse safe leave, which provides for paid leave, will enable the person who is experiencing the abuse to take time out from work without fear to put in place safeguards to keep themselves and their family safe and not have to worry about losing a day's pay, being forced to take annual leave, being penalised or reprimanded for taking time off or being at risk of losing their position in the organisation. Employers have a duty of care to their staff, and workplace health and safety procedures should include provisions that acknowledge domestic violence. It is also important to recognise that work can provide a safe and supportive space for victims of abuse and a supportive environment. The removal of stigma needs to be encouraged. Additional to the provisions for guidance in this Bill is the need for guidance and training on a greater awareness in the workplace of the signs of domestic abuse.

It is no exaggeration to state, as the Bill sponsor has done, that this Bill will save lives. It will certainly make a difference in the lives of victims of abuse. If we are to stamp out violence against women and girls, then, alongside tackling the root cause of misogyny and the culture that enables it, is removing the stigma for those who are victims and, as the Bill sponsor outlined, the stigma of disbelief. There is no shame in being a victim of abuse. We need workplaces to acknowledge the needs of those who suffer at the hands of abusers and for employers to stand with victims and survivors to ensure that they get the support that they need. This Bill will, hopefully, go some way to achieving that.

A Phríomh-LeasCheann Comhairle, with a little bit of indulgence, I want to make a remark on some of the commentary at the weekend, including on 'Sunday Politics', about legislation that is progressing, including this Bill, that is unlikely to pass before the end of this mandate. I do not believe that that is the case. I think that, in the letter from the Speaker, legislative pressures were referenced. However I have to say that, particularly in relation to the most recent letter from the Speaker last week, which outlined steps that are being taken to ensure that as much legislation as possible can pass before the end of the mandate, I was reassured about that. As the Chairperson of a Committee that is dealing with a number of private Member's Bills (PMBs), I will be doing all that I can to ensure that they pass with due scrutiny and in a timely manner. So, I would like to offer some reassurance to the Bill sponsor and to those who have campaigned for this Bill that the

intent is to get it through before the end of this mandate.

Finally, the Bill sponsor will know that my party colleagues Mary Lou McDonald and Louise O'Reilly have introduced a Bill in the Dáil to make similar provision for domestic abuse safe leave. It passed Second Stage last December and has been somewhat delayed in progressing, despite cross-party support, due to, I believe, some technical wrangling between Ministers and Departments. If she could encourage her ministerial colleagues in government to work with my colleagues to progress that Bill and ensure that workers across the island who are suffering domestic abuse are entitled to statutory paid leave, I think that that would be a very positive development.

In conclusion, I support this Bill and look forward to its progressing to Committee Stage for further scrutiny.

Ms Dolan: There were 31,196 domestic abuse incidents recorded in 2020-21. That is the third highest level that has been recorded since the data series began in 2004-05. Unfortunately, the pandemic's impact on domestic abuse will extend well beyond the easing of any lockdowns. Domestic abuse and sexual assault walk through the doors of each workplace across Ireland every day. Domestic abuse does not stop when you leave for work in the morning; for some, it follows them. Victims are known to have experienced domestic violence, such as stalking, excessive phone calls and threats, in their workplace. For others, the workplace often offers a safe space and respite away from their abuser. Either way, domestic abuse robs employees of their dignity and health.

It is crucial that we break down any barriers or stigmas surrounding domestic abuse so that employees are not afraid or ashamed about approaching their managers with domestic violence concerns. Victims may have to leave work early due to a crisis at home; they may have absenteeism due to injury or stress; they may have had to leave their home in the middle of the night with only the clothes on their back; they could be staying in a refuge that is miles away from their support network; they may have multiple court visits in order to seek a domestic violence protection order. Add to that the stress and worry that they might lose their job or might not be able to afford to take unpaid leave. Employers have a legal responsibility to provide a safe and effective working environment, as well as a duty of care to employees. The introduction of this paid statutory leave will send a clear message that

the health and safety of all employees is taken seriously. It places the victim at the centre of the process at a time when they feel isolated and have nowhere to turn.

Whilst the emotional and psychological cost of domestic violence is devastating, there are also economic costs associated with this crime. An international study commissioned by Vodafone found that the potential loss of earnings for a female victim of domestic abuse is £5,800. The same study found the estimated direct cost to businesses' bottom line to be £316 million a year, due to decreased productivity, time off work, lost wages and sick pay.

I imagine that a number of employers may, unfortunately, be opposed to the Bill, especially those who already treat their workers poorly and do not provide fair workers' rights or conditions. Other employers may just need support and clarity, however, and therefore a holistic approach is required to build awareness and understanding of the impacts that domestic abuse can have on individuals. Colleagues and managers are often the only people that survivors talk to outside the home each day and are therefore uniquely placed to help to spot signs of abuse. We need to ensure that employers have the means to develop safe and inclusive workplace environments where victims can feel confident to disclose domestic abuse. We also need to ensure that they know how to support victims in a variety of situations, such as when domestic abuse impacts on safety in the workplace or leads to performance issues, or where the victim works with the perpetrator.

Across the water, the Employers' Initiative on Domestic Abuse (EIDA) has been established. It is a network of over 470 public and private employers that aims to enable employers to take action on domestic abuse by raising awareness among all employees, supporting those facing domestic abuse and providing access to services to help perpetrators to stop. That approach should be explored here, and I wonder whether the Bill sponsor has come across that during her research and consultation.

Other jurisdictions around the world, including Italy, Canada and New Zealand, have introduced statutory provision for safe leave. Closer to home — as my colleague just mentioned — our party leader, Mary Lou McDonald, and party colleague Louise O'Reilly have brought a similar Bill to Leinster House. I hope that the Dublin Government are listening to this debate and that they step back from obstructing that Bill. I support this Bill.

Mr Weir: I welcome the opportunity to participate in this debate. As a member of the Economy Committee, I welcome the fact that the Committee had the first opportunity to deal with some of the details of this with the sponsor of the Bill. That was a very useful session. At the outset, I will say that I think that there will be a unity of purpose and views across the Chamber in relation to domestic abuse. For the avoidance of any obfuscation or doubt, my party will support the Bill passing Second Stage, as I hope all other parties will.

I am sure that the Bill sponsor agrees that, in a certain regard, it is a pity that legislation of this nature is necessary. I think that all of us would like to live in a society from which domestic abuse had been eliminated, but, unfortunately, too many women and, indeed, men are victims of domestic abuse. The Chair and the Bill sponsor highlighted — this is of particular relevance to the Economy Committee — the impact on our workforce and the economic impact for employers. A number of studies have been highlighted. Beyond the pure facts and figures of the economic impact, the scourge of domestic abuse bears down on the individual. It can ruin people's lives. Tragically, it has led to the death of a number of women. That is utterly unacceptable in our society. The more that we can do to combat domestic abuse, the more that we should embrace those opportunities.

If the Bill is brought through in this mandate and we reach the point at which it becomes law, we will be the first jurisdiction among our neighbours to have this issue on a statutory basis. Mention has been made of the Republic of Ireland, where similar proposals are being brought in. I do not know what level of hold-up there is, but I suspect that the Irish Government will not be hanging on my every word. While the actions that we are taking are not unique, we would be the early runners among our neighbouring jurisdictions. As was indicated by the Bill sponsor, we can draw from examples from other jurisdictions, be it New Zealand, Canada or Italy. There are lessons that can be learned. Similarly, as has been indicated, the Bill, in many ways, provides a statutory footing for something that is provided on a much more informal basis by a number of employers in the public sector and the private sector. I think that the Committee will want to learn the lessons from elsewhere on what is happening on a more informal basis.

As is the case with much legislation, there is a balance to be struck between how prescriptive the Bill is in the first instance and what needs to be brought in via regulations. Although the Bill highlights a number of key principles, it,

essentially, acts as a paving mechanism. The level of leave is clearly stated in the Bill. Similarly, it deals with the issue of not having to show a burden of proof in order to qualify for the leave. I appreciate the points that the sponsor made on that. In addition, importantly, the Bill should, as much as possible, be preventative and proactive in combating domestic abuse, rather than being simply reactive. The provision that indicates that it does not have to be a sustained system of abuse, but rather can, essentially, be provoked by a clear initial one-off incident, could help as an intervention. It could help to save lives.

It is often the case in the House that, when we look at the balance between the details in a Bill and what is then put in regulations, there is an over-elaboration at the initial stage. We can be too prescriptive about the details initially, but the Bill does not have that tendency. I think that the Member will concede that, as it places a requirement on the Department to bring forward regulations, those will have to be subjected to considerable consultation and there will have to be additional steps. It is right that it is not overly prescriptive. The Committee will want to make sure that the detail is sufficient, at least at this stage. It is important that we give as much certainty as can, as early as we can, to employees who are potential victims of domestic abuse and to employers.

To that end, I will highlight a couple of issues that are important.

5.15 pm

The direct financial burden on the Department may, in the grand scheme of things, not be that large. However, it is also important, as we look at the detail of the legislation, that we ensure that the correct powers are there for the Department. For example, if there is a need for the Department to obtain particular pieces of information so that it is able to draw up a report, will we have to look at tabling amendments to ensure that the Department has the legal authority to do that?

Although I understand very strongly that it would be too much to try to have a burden of proof in the legislation, ultimately the format or level of notification that is required for triggering the process may be in the regulations so that there is certainty for the employee and the employer. It is important that we have a recognition that there is some relatively straightforward process through which the process can be triggered. Allied to that, particularly as Northern Ireland is a very small

place, how can we ensure that, in the relationship between employee and employer, we have confidentiality when it comes to information? For instance, how do we ensure that, when somebody is suddenly missing from work for a few days, the whispers do not go round that, "So-and-so is off because of domestic abuse" and their business is put in the public domain? We need something that is clear cut within that.

Dr Archibald: Will the Member give way?

Mr Weir: I will take a brief intervention as my time is limited.

Dr Archibald: There are other examples from elsewhere — maybe the Bill sponsor can refer to them when she sums up — of how that is done, the notification that is used and the procedures that are in place in workplaces and the guidance around that. Perhaps the Bill sponsor can enlighten us.

Mr Weir: I agree: we will have to draw on lessons from other jurisdictions. They will have to be put in the particular culture of Northern Ireland to see whether they will work in practice here, as we seem to live in a very small and enclosed world.

Mention was made on a number of occasions of the research that has been done. The Bill sponsor said that she sees the process as being financially self-washing for employers as the money saved would more than compensate for any cost. There is a duty on the Committee to drill down and make sure that employers are also protected and are not left in a disadvantaged position as a result of trying to do the right thing by following the law and protecting their employees. A point that one of my colleagues raised with the Bill sponsor is that there is limited detail on how we directly define a victim of domestic abuse, be they a direct victim or an indirect victim. My colleague may dwell on that a bit longer.

It is clear that the broad principles of the Bill are ones that all of us in the House can accept and support. I look forward to the work that will go on in the Committee to delve into the detail, because, although the regulations will be brought forward at a later stage, it is important that we get this as right as we can from day one. That will mean us balancing the need to four-square future levels of consultation with providing the greatest level of certainty to employers and, particularly, the victims of domestic abuse.

Mr O'Toole: I strongly support the passage of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill through its Second Stage and on to its Committee Stage. First, it is worth saying that the context for the Bill, as has been stated, is the particularly shocking position that this region finds itself in with domestic violence. There were 32,000 domestic violence incidents — that is nearly 90 a day — recorded in Northern Ireland in 2018-19. As has been pointed out, since the beginning of the pandemic and the associated lockdown, there have been 11 murders, killings and deaths related to domestic violence. That context is shocking, and it places on all of us a burden to explore all avenues, including legislation, that might address the very real and particular challenges of domestic abuse that we have here. The Bill sponsor touched on the fact that examples of the legislation are already beginning to be practised in jurisdictions around the world, including not only in Australia and New Zealand but in jurisdictions closer to home. As has been mentioned, there is an Irish Government consultation on the matter and draft legislation in the Oireachtas.

I thank the Bill sponsor for giving very comprehensive initial evidence to the Economy Committee last week and for meeting my party colleagues earlier today to address the Bill's purpose. It is worth saying that it is a short Bill; its principles are clear and have already been laid out. It proposes a statutory provision of at least 10 days' paid leave each year for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. There is a non-exhaustive list of what that leave can be provided for.

The Bill specifies the types of regulation that the Department for the Economy is empowered to make. That is critical to understanding what the Bill is. It is a tool that puts an obligation on the Department to make regulations that create a minimum level of safe leave for victims and survivors of domestic abuse, but it is not prescriptive in the details of the mechanics for doing so. In a sense, that is welcome, because if the imperative is to get the Bill on the statute books, get the principle into law and allow the Department to go away and do the detail, that seems to be a practical and pragmatic way of dealing with it.

It is important to point out and echo others' remarks on the fact that the core motivation behind the Bill is to address the unacceptable and appalling human cost of domestic abuse to its victims and survivors. It is also legitimate to acknowledge, as others have done, that domestic abuse does tangible economic damage to individual businesses, small and

large, and, indeed, to the economy more broadly. There is clearly an effect on employee productivity — not that that is the most important thing, but it is not an irrelevant consideration — and, as has been said, there is a broader hit to the overall economy through time lost. The most important thing is that, in providing these statutory rights, we begin to address the epidemic that faces our society.

There will be specific, detailed questions that the Committee will want to examine. It is my hope that we can proceed swiftly through Committee Stage, do our work on the Bill, scrutinise it swiftly and give it serious consideration without causing undue delay. Our party does not believe that there is fundamentally anything in the Bill that should cause undue delay. The Member has brought credible draft legislation and has clearly done a significant amount of work on it. She has already answered many of the broad questions that people have raised, such as those on costs for employers or on definitions. Indeed, as I understand it, the experience in New Zealand and Australia is that their legislation has imposed a relatively small cost on employers. An effort might be needed to increase awareness for employees that that statutory right exists.

Let us also bear in mind that, with costs that are borne by business, not only is there a longer-term benefit to businesses in ensuring that their employees are safe and able to do their jobs in a way that they are protected and that does not result in turmoil for the rest of their lives but there is disproportionate damage to individuals who are affected by domestic abuse.

In closing, we support the Bill proceeding to Committee Stage, at which time we look forward to scrutinising it in detail. I very much welcome the Bill's Second Stage today, and I congratulate the Bill sponsor.

Mr Butler: At the outset, I thank Miss Rachel Woods for bringing forward the Bill. I might not be the Member who will speak on the Bill as we go forward, but I spoke to Mike Nesbitt, who is on the Economy Committee, and my leader, Doug Beattie, who met Rachel Woods a number of weeks ago to discuss the Bill. During my handover, I was told that it was a good, pragmatic Bill.

As the Member for South Belfast pointed out, the Bill may be only four pages long, but it is four pages that could be transformative in the lives of those whom it affects. It affects not only those who are directly impacted by domestic violence, be that physical, sexual or coercive

violence, but other people, such as the kids who belong to the families that are impacted by those who are subjected to those incidents.

I did a calculation, and, during this hour, in Northern Ireland, disgracefully and disgustingly, there will be between three and a half and four incidents of domestic abuse. As we have heard, there were 31,000 to 32,000 incidents last year, but, as the sponsor pointed out to us, that could be just the tip of the iceberg because there is still a stigma attached to reporting incidents of domestic violence. That is reprehensible.

We have faced down many things over the years. I think back to strategies that were seen to be important in the past where there has been success and we have effected change. I think about my background in the Fire Service when we said that deaths due to accidental fires were unacceptable, and we changed that. We looked at how legislation could affect the safety of people in any structure, whether that was in their home or at a private event. We had advertising campaigns, and we brought in legislation.

I see Miss Woods's legislation as something that will save lives. The four pages talk about paid leave for workers, but it is not about the money. It is very clear from what has been said that it is about creating the space and confidence for people to speak up and reach out for help, unhindered by the thought of losing a day's pay, unhindered by ridicule or by someone not understanding and unhindered by the thought of losing their job or the pressures that it would bring to the workplace with lost productivity. In fact, some of the information has shown that it could be better for the economy and for businesses. If that is the environment in which the Bill is brought forward, that should make it easier for people who are struggling.

It would be remiss of me not to revisit some of the statistics that have been cited today because I hope that the Bill does more than just create that space. I hope that, in years to come, when we look at PSNI statistics, that situation will be reversed. Mr Weir pointed out that it is not just females who are victims of domestic abuse; it is also males. The statistics that we have seen this year show that 69% of reported incidents involved females and 31% involved males. We also have to look at the fact that 86% of offenders are male.

I have a 22-year-old daughter, who will be 23 shortly, and I was brought up with a little saying in the back of my head, "Treat your wife or others as you would like your daughter to be treated".

The phrase "toxic masculinity" is going around in my head. Look at the stats that we have heard in the Chamber, guys. If it is happening as often as is reported, we are not too far away from it ourselves in our own families and friendship groups. That is something that needs to change.

5.30 pm

It is a transformative Bill, but what will it actually do? It will provide security and peace of mind for the people whom domestic abuse affects. It will help destigmatise the issue, educate business owners and operators and, indeed, improve productivity. The Bill has wide-ranging positive implications. I am sure that the Ulster Unionist Party member of the Committee will put forward additions to the Bill and that any that he does put forward will be positive and will improve it. We look forward to working on the Bill.

Finally, as a member of the Business Committee, I am well aware that legislative pressure is building, but items of business are coming through that are non-contentious and will help save lives. I would like to think that there are things that we can do to see Bills being prioritised that will make a difference to people's lives, such as this one.

Mr Dickson: On behalf of the Alliance Party, I support the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill. As others have said, the Bill proposes allowing 10 days' annual leave for victims and survivors. The sexual, mental and physical abuse that is felt by victims cannot be overstated and must never be understated, as it is entirely shocking. I thank the Member for bringing forward this vital legislation. I must add that it builds on the tireless work of my colleague the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, when, earlier this year, she delivered the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Act (Northern Ireland) 2021.

When we think of domestic violence, we do not typically think of the workplace, but we should. Domestic violence may happen behind closed doors, but it has far-reaching consequences and impacts on the working life of those who live with an abusive partner. As others have mentioned, the scale of the problem is huge. A Trades Union Congress survey reported that in the UK, in any one year, more than one in five victims of domestic violence has to take time off work because of abuse, while 2% lose their job as a direct result. Those are shocking figures.

We can now say that domestic abuse has reached pandemic proportions. In Northern

Ireland, we have some of the most concerning rates of domestic abuse in the United Kingdom. From April 2019 to March 2021, there were nearly 32,000 incidents of domestic abuse. That equates to an incident every 17 minutes in 2020. The Bill allows Northern Ireland to catch up with countries that have already introduced similar legislation, such as Australia, New Zealand and, as we have heard, the Republic of Ireland, where legislation is currently being progressed. It is so important that we offer the same protection to victims and survivors in Northern Ireland. Support in the form of paid leave is crucial to ensuring that they retain employment and have the economic flexibility to escape an abusive relationship in all the circumstances that are referred to, but not exhaustively so, in the Bill.

Having worked for some 30 years in the Labour Relations Agency (LRA), I think that the Bill is taking us in absolutely the right direction. I have some areas of concern, however. One is about confidentiality, which is an area that we raised in Committee last week, and one that, like me, I hope that the Committee and the Bill sponsor will look forward to dealing with over the next few weeks. The issue came up when I worked on the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill and relates to the embarrassment, perhaps, around miscarriage and not wanting that news to be circulated. That is completely understandable. In the case of this Bill, however, someone is in an abusive relationship. It is not about embarrassment: there is a risk to life and limb. The Economy Committee therefore needs to consider that issue in order to ensure that there is a higher level of confidentiality to protect victims from what might be described as "water-cooler conversations" and, indeed, to see that those who have, hold, are given and retain information in an employment context be held to a high level of confidentiality, perhaps even to that of criminal conviction, if they disclose a victim's information.

We should look also at extending safe leave or time off to victims and survivors of sexual assault, which is traumatic and life-changing. Ultimately, we want to support the victims of abuse, whether domestic or sexual, and that appears to be the right thing to do.

I conclude by thanking Rachel Woods for bringing forward the Bill. I look forward to working alongside her, in my role on the Economy Committee, to ensure that the legislation is victim-centred. We need to look not only at the survivors of sexual assault in domestic circumstances but at anyone who has been sexually assaulted. Such survivors will be

in similar circumstances in relation to confidentiality and to the shock and trauma that they have faced. I encourage the Committee and the Member sponsoring the Bill to look at whether, within the bounds of the Bill, it would be possible to extend its provisions beyond those in domestic violence circumstances.

We must not turn a blind eye to the issues of domestic and sexual violence, and the Bill is an essential step in increasing the necessary support. I thank the Member for bringing it forward. I look forward to the work that we will do in the Committee, and I am cognisant of the comments that the Chair and a member of the Business Committee made. It is important that legislation such as this is expedited as much possible, effectively and efficiently but taking into account all the serious issues that it raises, and that we pledge to deliver the Bill in this mandate.

Mr K Buchanan: I support the Bill. What is domestic abuse, and who can become a victim? The simple answer is that anyone can become a victim of domestic abuse, regardless of gender, age or ethnic background. It is not just physical abuse but includes sexual abuse, financial abuse, emotional abuse, coercive control and, indeed, other forms of abuse. You do not have to be physically harmed to be abused. We must always be mindful that domestic abuse has consequences for other members of the household and/or family.

While the Bill seems, in principle, to be reasonable and justifiable, some issues need to be further addressed when it reaches Committee Stage, as I have no doubt that it will. I am not about to make negative comments. They are general observations and comments for the Committee and the Bill sponsor. Will the Bill affect wider employment law? Will it have any effects? What will the evidence requirements be? I appreciate references made by the Bill sponsor and by my colleague to that issue. Other countries have implemented this; what do they use? How does an employee have the conversation, which is not easy, with their employer, bearing in mind that the Department will have to report on how the law is being implemented? It is a difficult issue to get clarification on, but we need to drill into it and get information on best practice.

Who will be classified as a victim in the Bill? Will it only be direct victims — we touched on that the other day in the Committee — as classified by the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings (Northern Ireland) Act 2021, or will it include those who, for example, live in a household in which there is abuse and who are

affected, directly or indirectly, by it? We need to tease that out and get clarity on it. How far does that go? You can be a victim of domestic abuse without being a direct victim. I am sure that Members understand where I am coming from on that point. We need to consider that further when the Bill progresses.

It should be noted that, while similar legislation is in place in other jurisdictions, there is no UK law that provides an entitlement to paid time off for those suffering domestic violence or abuse. The Bill, as it stands, does not provide substantive detail on implementation of the measures. The details of the Bill's outworkings would fall to the Department for the Economy, and, as a consequence, significant public consultation would be required for the associated regulations.

A situation may arise in which the legislation, as drafted, may not provide for or permit regulations to be made in accordance with the findings of any future consultations. Further clarification will also be required on how the sensitive matter of seeking supporting information from victims and survivors of domestic abuse will be addressed. Without careful examination, the handling or, indeed, mishandling of such matters — the previous Member who spoke touched on that — runs the risk of undermining the employee/employer relationship. Ultimately, that could, in a worst-case scenario, result in further trauma. It should also be recognised that some employees may be reluctant to discuss such issues with their employer.

(Mr Deputy Speaker [Mr Beggs] in the Chair)

Members will be aware that a wide range of employment law issues continue to be of interest to the Assembly. A number of employment law Bills have been proposed in this mandate. If each of those is taken forward as a single issue on a piecemeal basis, there is a risk that there will not be sufficient opportunity to fully assess the potential implications of each piece of legislation on the others and on the wider employment rights framework. It will be necessary to ensure that any legislation drafted is operable and is fully assessed to ensure that there are no unintended consequences.

To be fair, I am not taking away from the points that I or others have made. We are content for the Bill to go to Committee Stage. To clarify my position, my previous points are not negative comments. They are purely to seek clarification and, no doubt, that will be teased out at the Committee Stage. I thank the Bill's sponsor for bringing it forward.

Ms Dillon: First, I support the Bill. However, before I go any further, whilst I welcome the comments of Mr Butler, we need to acknowledge that we are not so far away from those people. As I have said in the House before, we need to acknowledge that nobody is above being either a victim or an abuser, not even the people in the House: nobody. Domestic abuse affects everybody, right across every sector of our society. If we do not acknowledge that, we allow people to believe that someone is above that or is outside of that spectrum, and that is not the case. Anyone in our society has the potential to be a victim or a perpetrator. For me, that is why this piece of legislation is so important.

During the debate on the domestic abuse Bill, we looked at the possibility of putting this in. However, unfortunately, it was found to be outwith the scope of the Bill, and it came under the Economy Minister's brief. It is important that we have an opportunity to address the issue that was left out of the domestic abuse Bill. We now have an opportunity to do something that will support victims. We need to take that opportunity and grab it with both hands, because domestic abuse is not only an issue for the courts. It is not only an issue for the police. It is an issue for every single person. It is why we ensured that Operation Encompass was included in the domestic abuse Bill. I acknowledge that the previous Education Minister, Peter Weir, ran a pilot project in the run-up to the domestic abuse Bill going live. All those elements — every possible protection and support that we can give to the victims of domestic abuse — is what makes the whole package.

It is not good enough to say that we have a judicial process, because we all know how many perpetrators will ever see the inside of a courtroom, and, even for those that do, we know the statistics for the success rates. Some victims are just not strong enough to go through that process, so we need to put other things in place to ensure that they have the best opportunity to make their lives better and get the support to, potentially, leave their abuser. Some will never leave their abuser. That does not mean that they should not avail themselves of safe leave. They may never have the courage or be in a position, for whatever reason, to leave their abuser. It is not our job to judge them for that; it is our job to support them. We must ensure that we allow the potential for them to get a couple of days' respite, if they can get that.

As has been said by a number of Members, it is not just the victim. In those situations, children

are very often the victims: those whom you want to protect most in your life. I speak as a mother, and I am quite sure that all the parents in the room will feel the same way. Again, to not be able to leave your home or have a way out of those circumstances for a number of days because you have to go to work —

Mr Butler: Will the Member give way?

Ms Dillon: Absolutely.

Mr Butler: The Member is very passionate about this subject, and I have listened to her speak on this many times. Does the Member agree that we have an intergenerational problem? Look at the statistics from as far back as 2004: the numbers are not changing. In fact, in some years, they have gone up. The effect on children can sometimes be that it empowers another generation to carry on the wrongs of the past.

Ms Dillon: Absolutely. I agree with the Member. It is for that reason that what we are doing now is only a starting point. The domestic abuse Bill was really good. This Bill will be really good, but how do we improve things? How do we make things better?

We have a lot to do in our education system and across every sector. We have a responsibility to make a difference, particularly in helping children understand what a healthy relationship looks like. We should support every child in that regard from before they come into the world. If we do not do that, we will allow it to continue be the transgenerational problem that, we know, it is.

5.45 pm

I will not go over the points that other Members have made — there is no value in that — but I want the realisation to be understood: these are real people, and we have a responsibility and an opportunity to make a real difference. They might never see the courts or justice, but they will, at least, have the support of the Assembly. This is only a starting point, but we will give them support in every way possible to ensure that we make life better for the victims and the unseen victims — the children and those who live in those homes.

I ask all Members to support the Bill. I understand some of the points that Members have made about the difficulties, but I have faith in our MLAs, and I have faith in the sponsor of the Bill. I sincerely hope that the Department will give all the support that it can. I have faith in

the Economy Committee to give the support that it can and to come up with answers. Some of the solutions are already out there. All of the issues can be overcome.

Confidentiality is a massive issue. We need to be careful with the messaging around confidentiality, because people do not have to be silent about this if they do not want to be. They should be given confidence that they have done nothing wrong. A shroud of silence is often what allows perpetrators to continue doing what they do. If victims want to be open and decide to tell their colleagues about what is going on, they should be given the support and confidence to do so, but, equally, they should have the absolute confidence that confidentiality is a priority to anyone whom they give that information to, if that is what they want.

Mr Dunne: I welcome the opportunity to speak on this important issue — the Second Stage of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill — and I am happy to support it at this stage.

Domestic abuse is a scourge on our society, and, unfortunately, it has been on the rise in recent years. It impacts on women, men and children, regardless of colour, class or creed, and it can take many forms, including physical, emotional, verbal and digital, to name but a few. As has been said, a lot of good work was achieved over the past year or year and a half through the Domestic Abuse and Civil Proceedings Bill, which completed its journey through the House earlier this year to help tackle this most heinous and cruel of crimes.

The pandemic, the challenges of which we continue to face, has brought about lockdowns and restrictions that have left many people spending more time at home, often feeling more isolated and vulnerable — even to being a victim of domestic abuse. According to PSNI statistics, there has been an alarming increase in recorded domestic abuse incidents and crimes since 2004. Incident levels in 2020-21 were one and a half times higher than those in 2004-05, and crime levels were nearly twice as high. Regrettably, there are also many incidents that will never be reported or recorded, due to fear and coercion. I have spoken regularly to the PSNI in my constituency. They often talk about the considerable time taken to deal with issues around domestic abuse and the serious, complex and sensitive nature of that. Figures highlight that there have been 179 more crimes in the Ards and north Down policing district in the past year. That confirms a worrying rise in that type of crime.

I fully support any measures to support victims of domestic abuse in people's homes, in their community and in the workplace. Whilst, alarmingly, the statistics point to higher incidence rates across Northern Ireland, there is, undoubtedly, greater awareness of this type of abuse. We can all welcome that. It has helped people to have the confidence to speak up, speak out and get the vital support that they need. I commend the victim support groups who work across the country — in rural and urban areas and across our constituencies. I thank them for the work that they do, particularly on awareness and support. That is greatly needed, given the reality of the statistics, which show that such abuse occurs in all 18 constituencies. It can occur in anybody's home, regardless of background, wealth or any other measure.

We can, no doubt, all agree with the general principles of the Bill to support victims of abuse. A sad reality that we must face up to is that, unfortunately, home is not always the safest place to be. Sometimes, it is not the haven that it should be, and that is particularly pertinent to victims of domestic abuse. The workplace can, unfortunately, be a place where abuse can take place, but work can be a welcome distraction for those who may suffer abuse at home. In some situations, work can be one of the few places where people feel safe and, if they have the confidence to speak to colleagues or employers, can often be one of their main sources of help. It affords them the opportunity to reach out, speak up and speak out.

There are cost issues associated with the Bill that have to be considered. Whilst not taking away from the seriousness of the issue in hand, I have some concerns about the significant financial responsibility that some outworkings of the Bill could put onto employers, particularly given the context of Northern Ireland, where we have such a strong group of small businesses, which are the backbone of our economy. We are blessed to have many micro, small and medium-sized businesses, with our SMEs accounting for 75% of employment here. Many of those businesses have faced an incredibly challenging 18 months, with restrictions, lockdowns and uncertainty that, unfortunately, continues to this day. There are gaps at this stage, and I am keen to see more progress and work, particularly through consultation and engagement with key stakeholders on the issue, in order to ensure that the Bill does not have a disproportionate impact on those businesses as employers and to mitigate any unintended consequences that the Bill may have.

Many employers are responsible, compassionate and understanding of employees and their needs and circumstances. Whilst that is not always the case, it is a point worth making. Targeted support and working in partnership with employees can often be the best way of resolving issues and addressing domestic abuse, which must be done in a sensitive and confidential way, as other Members have said in the debate.

It is important that we see further clarity in the definition of a victim. My colleague Mr Buchanan touched on that. We definitely need to see some more meat on the bones in relation to the definition of a victim. Victims are not just those who are directly impacted by the abuse; they can include family members, friends and work colleagues, who can be equally impacted indirectly by such violence. That raises more issues that it would be better for the Department to look at collectively going forward, with full consultation, engagement and focused outcomes. I certainly support the Bill at this stage, and I look forward to working alongside colleagues and the Bill sponsor to see it progress further.

Ms McLaughlin: The Bill is welcome legislation that will make a real difference to the lives of victims and survivors of domestic abuse. Too often, we read the tragic stories in the papers and there is a public outpouring of grief, yet our institutions are not moved to action. The status quo remains, and we go on. Then it happens again and again and again. It is not at all an exaggeration to say that the Bill has the potential to save lives; indeed, as other Members have said, we learned recently that Northern Ireland has Europe's joint highest murder rate of women suffering domestic violence. That is a terrible indictment of our society. Inaction is not an option.

The right to paid time off work will help to empower victims and survivors of domestic abuse, giving them invaluable time and space. While the Bill sets out some examples, I welcome the fact that it does not limit safe leave to those purposes. Flexibility is crucial. Many report that they fear losing their job, so we must strive to alleviate any pressures that we can during what can only be an incredibly frightening and difficult period.

Of course, that is just one part of what must be a multi-departmental approach to tackling domestic abuse. It is my hope that the Executive Office strategy to tackle violence against women and girls will contain actions that support women and girls suffering violence and prevent it. We know that domestic violence

is all too common in our society, and the recent stats underline the scale of the issue. It is also really important to make it clear that it can happen to anyone, as Linda has just outlined. We need an action programme that includes improved rescue support for women and children who are at risk. It is essential that the police and other criminal justice agencies take fast and effective action when there are warning signs.

We also need to take steps to ensure that our society has a culture of mutual respect that dismantles misogyny. The principles of respect and an understanding of what constitutes consent must be taught in all schools, making the reform of relationships and sexuality education an absolute necessity. Moreover, we all have a part to play in attempting to challenge unacceptable behaviour when we see it and if it is safe to do so. Therefore, as Chair of the Committee for the Executive Office, I feel that oversight of the strategy to address violence against women and girls is one of my most important and pressing priorities.

Returning to the Bill more specifically, I commend the Bill sponsor, Miss Woods, for including this important sentence:

"The regulations may not impose conditions about length of service for eligibility for safe leave."

We have already seen how allowing compassionate leave to be at the discretion of the employer can place some employees at an absolute disadvantage. It is vital that a minimum standard is set so that all employees are treated fairly and can access the support that they need.

We should take full advantage of employment law being a devolved issue. Northern Ireland can and should lead in this area. It is heartening to see the Bill aim to achieve just that. I support the Bill at Second Stage.

Mr Carroll: I welcome the introduction of the Bill and thank the Bill sponsor for bringing it. Like many in the Chamber, I have been harrowed by the number of women who have been murdered since the beginning of the pandemic as a result of domestic violence. That shows that it is not only an issue in our society but one that has worsened in recent years. I also welcome the recent confirmation from the Justice Minister that she will introduce legislation in this arena next year. However, it is also a fair charge that the Assembly and the Executive have done far from enough to tackle the issue over the years. Indeed, as Suzanne

Breen wrote in 'Sunday Life' over the weekend, we have:

"the joint highest rate in Europe of women killed as a result of domestic violence. Eleven women have been murdered here since the start of the pandemic. Imagine if they had been killed in sectarian attacks. A multi-agency taskforce would long ago have been set up at Stormont to urgently tackle the problem."

I cannot help thinking that she is right. The headline this weekend that put us on the map as the most dangerous place for women in Europe was simultaneously gut-wrenching and not wholly surprising. From everyday sexism and misogyny to anti-choice legislation and a terrible record in the justice system of dealing with rape and sexual assault and with headlines such as that, we are all too aware of the situation that is facing and failing women and girls here.

While the Bill is, obviously, not gender-specific, it is clear that the gendered impact of domestic violence is a key factor in the reason why it has not been prioritised or properly addressed. Outside the Building, the real bulk of the work to raise awareness, secure services and provide support and refuges for women in domestic abuse situations has been done by women's groups, activists and volunteers — groups like Women's Aid, who say that they have supported 530 women in refuges since 2020, or the Women's Resource and Development Agency (WRDA), Alliance for Choice in Belfast and Derry, the Belfast Feminist Network and more. Without their work, I fear that the situation would be far worse. They are to be thanked not only for that important work but for the information that they collect and produce, which is key to exposing the scale of the problem.

The Bill is timely, and the changes that it will make are important. The Bill is right to situate the issue as a worker's issue. The increasingly precarious and low-paid nature of work, particularly for women, means that taking time off to deal with an issue arising from domestic abuse can be incredibly difficult or impossible for many. As with cases where a worker may require a termination, has suffered a miscarriage or has had to take on additional caring duties, those scenarios, including domestic violence, overwhelmingly impact on women workers, yet we have a dearth of legislative protection and support for those workers.

I hope that we can get the legislation passed as soon as possible without much interference. I support it and hope that everybody will do so today.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): I call the Minister for the Economy, Gordon Lyons, who will have up to 15 minutes to respond to the debate.

Mr Lyons (The Minister for the Economy): I thank the Bill sponsor for her efforts and the work that she has been doing to bring forward the Bill to legislate for leave for victims of domestic abuse. I also thank her for taking the time to meet me over the summer to go through some of the details of the Bill.

Her efforts in getting the Bill to this stage are to be commended, as are her efforts in shining the light, as so many do, on what is a truly horrific situation for those who suffer domestic abuse and violence.

6.00 pm

I do not underestimate the strength of character that it takes for someone to stay in employment when dealing with such trauma, the escape route that employment can provide, as Mr Dunne spoke about, or the benefit to individuals when employers do everything that they can to support their staff when such awful circumstances arise. I am fully aware of the need for society to support victims of domestic abuse as much as possible, including in the workplace when that is the appropriate place to do so.

As constituency representatives, all of us will have seen at first hand the impact that domestic abuse has on constituents, and we have heard harrowing stories. There should never be any room or any excuse for that in our society. I place on record my thanks to the voluntary and charitable organisations that do so much not only to help those suffering domestic abuse but to promote greater awareness and understanding of the prevalence of the problem.

I recognise the issue, so I am content that the Bill proceeds to the next stage. However, the next stage is an opportunity for us to tease out some of the issues that I raised privately with the Member and that other Members raised today. One of those is around cost and how we can make sure that that is wholly and adequately assessed. The explanatory and financial memorandum seems to have considered only the cost to the Department and not to the employers who would be required to

fund the proposed safe leave. While the Member suggested that there would be savings for employers in the longer term through less working time lost, that does not fully calculate the potential cost to individual employers, particularly micro-, small and medium-sized businesses. Many of those will want to support their employees through dreadful situations but may find it disproportionate to provide that level of support. It is important that that be teased out.

Mr Carroll: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Lyons: I am going to address this issue further, but, yes, I will give way.

Mr Carroll: I thank the Minister for giving way. Does he recognise that other people would be concerned that "cost to the employer" is used? We do not use that language when it comes to people taking time off for medical appointments, so why should we use it when it comes to dealing with people taking time off for domestic abuse?

Mr Lyons: Simply because it is important that, when we bring legislation through the Assembly, we know the impact that it will have. It is not at all irresponsible of us to ask those questions. In fact, it would be irresponsible of us not to ask those questions and to be fully aware of the implications of any decisions that we might make.

It is important to have engagement with key stakeholders — those who will be impacted by the legislation and those who could benefit from it. I understand that it is difficult and can seem distasteful to put a price on this. Certainly, it is my hope that all employers, and the Executive and Assembly as employers in our own right, will show that compassion to victims of domestic violence. The reality is that, to keep people in employment, we need to make sure that those businesses are viable in the first place and that, when we impose responsibilities on employers, they can be afforded and absorbed by them.

I acknowledge that the Member has recognised that point, and I note the assurances that she has given. It would be good to have that teased out and to hear the experience of other jurisdictions where this legislation has been introduced so that we can give clarity and encouragement to businesses. That said, we have businesses and employers in Northern Ireland that, in so many cases, are sympathetic. I do not think that the legislation is saying that we have unsympathetic employers in Northern

Ireland. I understand that the Member is trying to create a statutory right for everybody.

Ms Dillon: I thank the Minister for taking an intervention. I will make it brief. Does he recognise that there is a disparity at the minute between those who work in the public sector — the Finance Minister has acknowledged that they get domestic abuse leave — and those who work in the private sector? That is a real issue for anybody who is suffering domestic abuse.

Mr Lyons: I understand that point, and I want to make sure that, as the legislation is considered, we bring all those things into the debate. People will find it unfair if different standards apply at different times. I recognise that different employers offer different rights, but I agree with the Member on the need to support employees in that way.

On the wider point, it is important that I raise my increasing concern about employment law in Northern Ireland and about the need for us to make sure that, however well-intentioned some of our proposals are, we have full, proper consultation and consideration, not just on this legislation but on everything that we bring through. We have to understand that the decisions that we make will have consequences, so it is our job as legislators to make sure that we are doing everything that we can to consult fully and to recognise the implications of everything that we do.

I want to pick up on some Members' frustration with the Department's work in this area. Members will recognise that it has been hindered because we have had to prioritise the response to the pandemic, but it is important that, when we as a Department are considering such changes, we do so in a holistic manner, and when we are in a proper position to do so. We have not been able to move on as much of the employment law as I would have liked because of the other pressures that my Department has been under.

I will return to the legislation before us. I understand that similar legislation has been introduced in New Zealand, but it is important that we look not just at legislation but at the other measures that can be put in place. For example, the approach of the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to supporting victims of domestic abuse in the workplace has been to focus on workplace interventions that do not require legislative change, such as increased awareness and understanding, adoption of effective workplace

policies and the creation of a safe space in the workplace for victims of domestic abuse.

Indeed, I am sure that many Members are aware that many employers have recently adopted new workplace policies for their organisations that aim to provide support and guidance to those who find themselves in these difficult circumstances. Although providing time off work or allowing for flexible working is one important aspect of the support needed, there are many other things that employers can do to support their workers through difficult times, such as encouraging the individual to contact a specialist support agency and ensuring that the employee does not work alone or in an isolated area. If the employee is absent, a method of communication should be arranged with line managers so that they are aware that the individual is safe. Employers can also keep a record of any incidents of abuse in the workplace, including persistent telephone calls, emails and other forms of communication. Those are just a small number of examples set out in guidance for employers, which was developed by the Department of Health and the Department of Justice, on developing a workplace policy on domestic and sexual violence and abuse.

We therefore need to be certain that the approach that we take, whether it is a legislative route or otherwise, enables and encourages employers to provide the most appropriate support to their employees when they need it most. Regulation may not necessarily be the best vehicle for encouraging the supportive and understanding environment that we want to secure for those who are most vulnerable.

A few comments were made about the limited time left in this mandate. I certainly hope that we can progress legislation during this mandate, although I have to say that I am disappointed that time limits have been placed on debates in the Chamber. I think that some are more interested in the volume of legislation that goes through this place rather than on the quality of that legislation. I do not like the fact that we are having time limits. It does a disservice to legislation as important as this, so I urge a note of caution around what we can do in the time that we have.

As I said previously, I want to make sure that, when we are discussing this issue, we think not only about the legislation but about what employers can do right now, with empathy and flexibility, to support people. I send out that message today. Employers do not need legislation to do that. Providing safe leave is an approach that some employers already offer,

and I encourage all to consider it. However, before we make such a step mandatory, we must do all the necessary preparatory work.

I thank the Member for bringing the Bill to the House and providing the opportunity to discuss this important issue. We all agree that domestic violence is a blight on our society and we must work to provide adequate support to victims and survivors of domestic abuse. We need to ensure that we provide the right support.

There are a number of issues still to be worked out and questions to be answered, but I am more than content for the Bill to proceed to the next stage so that we can tease out those issues. Again, we thank the Member for bringing the issue to the Chamber so that we can have this debate and, hopefully, encourage those who are suffering in that way.

Miss Woods: I thank all the Members who contributed to the debate over the past hour and a bit. I am very grateful for the support that has been expressed from every corner of the Chamber as it, rightly, reflects the strength of feeling regarding the issue of providing paid leave for victims and survivors of domestic abuse. That was evident from the public consultation as well.

One of the most striking questions that I was asked repeatedly when I was consulting on and developing the Bill and engaging with people was, "Does this support not exist already?". The answer, of course, is that, yes, it exists, but only for a limited number of workers. At the moment, your right to safe leave depends on who you work for, and that should not be the case. Victims and survivors of domestic abuse face the same struggles, and it does not matter who they work for. Everyone should be entitled to the same level of help and support.

The Bill addresses the current inequality by creating a new legal entitlement to safe leave that will apply across the board, both to workers, that is, those without a formal contract, and employees. I will not repeat my opening remarks in which I set out the rationale and principles of the Bill, but I want briefly to address some of the comments and questions from Members and the Minister.

The Chair of the Economy Committee mentioned that the Committee had previously expressed support for the principle of safe leave, and I very much welcome that. She also recognised that costs would be offset by benefits, and, again, I totally agree: that is clearly what the experience elsewhere indicates.

I welcome the Chair, Mr Butler, Mr O'Toole and Mr Dickson's comments on expediting the Bill's passage through the Assembly. I also agree that we can and must ensure that the Bill becomes law before the end of the mandate.

Jemma Dolan raised a valid point on training and awareness in the workplace on domestic abuse. Employers and workplaces should be able to recognise the signs of abuse. Employer training came up in the consultation, and there are some very good guidance documents available for workplaces, and a lot of good training goes on in them. Many have their own policies in development.

Peter Weir described the extreme cost of domestic abuse in the number of lives lost. He recognised that, if we introduce safe leave, we will be leading the way across these islands. That is exactly what we should be doing.

Mr Weir and Mr O'Toole also touched on the distinction between primary and secondary legislation and the balance to be struck. The Bill does that. It reflects the key principles of what we want to implement while giving the Department flexibility to develop regulations.

Mr Weir, Mr Buchanan and Mr Dickson raised issues of confidentiality, and that is extremely important. The Bill, under proposed new article 112EE "Chapter 4: supplemental", gives the Department considerable scope to ensure that the regulations include provision to keep all employee records confidential and set minimum standards for requirements. However, as I have said, should the Committee wish to have something specific on confidentiality in the Bill, I am open to discussing it.

I also welcome Linda Dillon's comments that victims and survivors should feel that they are able to speak up, speak out and seek help.

Robbie Butler talked about how the Bill had the potential to save lives by providing the space for victims to seek safety.

He mentioned the statistics, and we should all bear those in mind. The figures are stark, and we must do more to address that problem. Stewart Dickson also said that he is keen to explore the scope of the Bill when it comes to victims of sexual assault. Again, I am open to considering that and exploring it further.

6.15 pm

Keith Buchanan raised some issues about the wider implications for employment law and who

would be considered victims. He said that the procedural requirements will be highly sensitive and will need to be considered carefully. I agree wholeheartedly that we need to avoid re-traumatising victims.

Linda Dillon reiterated the need to do everything that we can to support victims of domestic abuse, and she said the Bill could make a real difference. Sinead McLaughlin, too, highlighted the need for a violence against women and girls strategy. Both Members also commented on RSE. Members will know that I completely agree with their comments on healthy relationships and the need for mandatory, comprehensive RSE for our children and young people. Sinead and Linda also highlighted the need for employees to be treated fairly and equally.

Stephen Dunne spoke about the domestic abuse that goes unreported. I agree that we need to instil confidence in people to speak out. He also mentioned the financial implications for small businesses. I reiterate that we cannot detach the costs from the benefits. There are already significant costs to businesses as a result of domestic abuse. Therefore, taking proactive measures to tackle it will benefit them. Many in the private sector have already recognised that and are implementing safe leave policies.

Mr Carroll thanked the incredible people who help and support victims of domestic abuse. I completely support his comments. He also highlighted the gendered nature of this. That must be recognised.

The Minister also raised the cost implications for small businesses. I again point out the Australian research that shows that, out of 102 employers that introduced a form of paid domestic violence leave in 2014, two thirds had never had any leave requested by employees. A further 2016 study suggested that only 1.5% of female employees and 0.3% of male employees were likely to utilise paid domestic violence leave provisions in any given year. I recognise that the take-up of safe leave will be low. Obviously, there are issues of awareness that are a part of that, but it is a fact that the experience elsewhere demonstrates that that kind of leave is used by those who need it. We need to remember that. He also —

Ms Dillon: I thank the Member for giving way. I agree with what the Member has just said. Does she agree with me that many people who suffer from domestic abuse will never use that leave? However, the confidence that your employer recognises what you are going

through, even if they do not know about it, is something in itself. That will give people a bit of confidence that they are not crazy, mad or wrong but that somebody else is doing wrong.

Miss Woods: I thank the Member for her intervention. I completely agree with that. Having that support will definitely add to people's confidence. They will also know that that safety net is there, whether or not they need it or want to use it. It is about just having it. That came through greatly in the consultation responses, with people making comments about how they would really want their employers to have something like that in place. That is quite clear, especially when we see workplaces and employers implementing domestic abuse policies. They are recognising how much it impacts on them.

The Minister talked about employers in Northern Ireland who are sympathetic. To clarify, I was in no way suggesting that all employers in Northern Ireland are not sympathetic. Many businesses are providing great support to their employees and workers, but others are not. That is what the Bill is for. It will provide a level playing field.

The Minister also discussed other measures and a Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy review. Workplace interventions that do not come from legislation will be key to this. I encourage and support all measures being taken that can be taken. I see the Bill dovetailing with other measures that are being introduced anyway.

I understand that Members have a considerable number of questions and I very much look forward, should the Bill pass its Second Stage, to engaging further with the Committee as it conducts its scrutiny. As a society, we must do all that we can to stop domestic abuse and support victims and survivors. I believe that the Bill will go some way towards achieving that.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill [NIA 41/17-22] be agreed.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Mr Beggs): That concludes the Second Stage of the Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill. The Bill stands referred to the Committee for the Economy.

Adjourned at 6.20 pm.

Suggested amendments or corrections that arrive no later than two weeks after the publication of each report will be considered by the Editor of Debates.

They should be sent to:

✉ **Editor of Debates, Room 248, Parliament Buildings, BELFAST BT4 3XX**

☎ **028 9052 1135**

✉ **simon.burrowes@niassembly.gov.uk**

Hansard reports can be made available in a range of alternative formats, including large print, Braille etc. For more information, please contact:

✉ **Hansard Admin Unit, Room 251, Parliament Buildings, BELFAST BT4 3XX**

☎ **028 9052 1463**

✉ **hansard@niassembly.gov.uk**

The Official Report (Hansard) is licensed under the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence, which can be accessed here: [Open Data Licence](#)

[To receive an alert each time an updated plenary report is published, you can follow @NIAHansard on Twitter](#)